



# LITERALLY SPEAKING

Issue no.10 • FREE Edited by Glenn Carmichael & Sara-Jane Arbury

Monday 18th October 1999

## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Literary Snapshots  
Town Hall, 6-7pm

Vitali Vitaliev  
Everyman,  
8.45-9.45pm

Joseph Heller  
Town Hall,  
8.45-9.45pm

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](http://www.cheltenhamfestivals.co.uk/literature)

## Doubled up

BY FREJA MARSHALL  
& TOKI ALLISON

Chris Tutton was described as having a "sensitivity one always associates with the best poets." This was obvious in his reading at The Beehive; the audience were responsive to his sharp wit.

Tutton's poetry was a mixture of descriptive, emotional observation and short, adept quips, often containing polemic views on religion. He expressed cynical views on the subjects of fashion and human conformity, with experienced knowledge and a sense of wisdom.

Heather Spears' imagery mirrored her artistic abilities, provoking emotive reactions through repetition which emphasised her dramatic life experiences. Her reading of *The Panam Poems* alternated stunted, sharp phrases and smooth, fluent expressions; her success highlighted by her scientific and factual knowledge.

## Heaney: poetry Nobility

BY MICHAEL J WOODS

Like Beowulf, Seamus Heaney returned to Cheltenham as conquering hero. The trophy he brought with him in 1995 was the Nobel Prize for Literature. How appropriate, then, that he - arch-raider of the word hoard - should return with a new translation of the first great epic in our language. *Beowulf* speaks to us of a culture imbued with a sense of the heroic but one that is also blighted by blood feuds and ravaging marauders. Heaney did not dodge the obvious connections with Northern Ireland. This link was reinforced with a reading from *Station Island*.

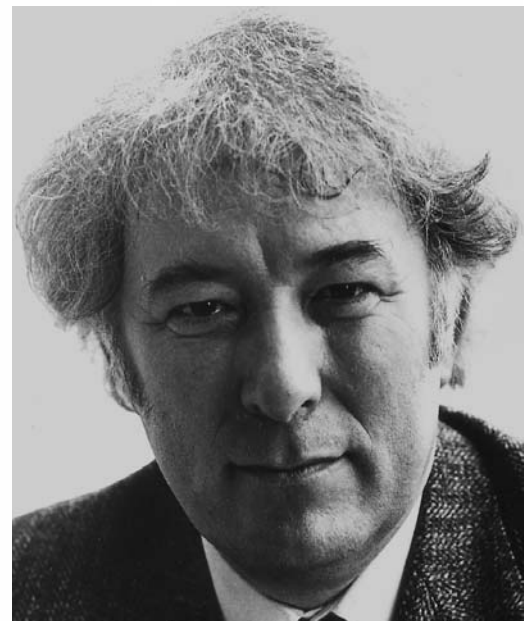
Linking his own variety of English with Anglo-Saxon, Heaney began by reading *Digging*, his first published poem which features the four stress line of the epic he was to rework thirty-three years later. In *Preoccupations*, Heaney writes that the function of the poet is to "give the culture back to

itself." It is particularly striking that a man from "where the Gaels made their last stand" (*An Open Letter*) should be giving the colonists' culture back to them.

In his wonderfully lucid introduction to *Beowulf* he recalls Hopkins's debt to Anglo-Saxon, and his own to Hopkins, in his incertus days. Hopkins wanted to rediscover the "naked thew and sinew of the English language" and this is athletically evident in *Beowulf*. Heaney has masterfully managed to maintain the alliterative power of the original, achieving a fine balance between grafting and riveting in the crafting of

his lines.

We all face our own Grendels but it is comforting to know that Heaney's



poetry offers us redress. In the face of all our troubles he reminds us that we should be willing to "credit marvels."

## Casual specs

BY ALASTAIR HIRD

John Hegley is best described as the result of an attempt to genetically combine all four members of an under-rehearsed Clash tribute band with a randomly selected, deranged primary school teacher. His performances, consisting of eclectic poetry readings interspersed with outbursts of frenzied singing and mandolin playing, are always unpredictable, and his appearance at the Festival was no exception.



After expressing intense disquiet about the emptiness of three reserved front row seats in an otherwise packed room, Hegley, assisted by the terrifyingly surreal Simon Munnery

of the *League Against Tedium*, went on to subject his audience to an hour of sonnets on the subject of amoebas, pumpkins and Blockbusters, and diatribes against contact lenses ("they betray humanity"). No other event at the Festival will feature a man with a bunch of plastic grapes in his mouth, asking the ceiling in a quiet, desperate, pleading voice, "How self-indulgent is this?" Nor will any other audience be encouraged to tap (six times) upon the lenses of their glasses. And no other front row will be the target of such ruthless derision; as Simon Munnery observed, "if the audience is behind you, you're facing in the wrong direction."

## Well Abel

BY AMY BIDGOOD

Shirley Hughes performed to a packed audience at the Playhouse yesterday morning. After studying at art school, she became a book illustrator, and then wrote her own stories after having children. *Lucy and Tom* was first published in 1960 and since then over 30 books, including the popular children's characters *Dogger* and *Alfie*, have appeared. Hughes received an O.B.E. for her work last year.

Audience participation was encouraged throughout her performance, which included a reading of her new book *Abel's Moon*. The children enjoyed various sketches, especially the character *Oswald*, with everything in his beard from "chocolate ice" to "nests of mice." Something for everyone...



## Land Lies

BY LUCIE RICHARDS

Glen Cavaliero returned to Cheltenham following an absence of 22 years and instantly adopted an informal tone; alluding admiringly to literature featuring the English countryside, ranging from Hardy's Wessex to Austen's "formal gardens" and Wordsworth's "supreme" landscape poetry.

Having established that the countryside in literature either serves an 'aesthetic' or 'utilitarian' purpose, he launched into a personal acclamation of John Cowper Powys' life and work; in particular his novel *A Glastonbury Romance*. He energetically communicated his admiration for Powys' "closely focused" style, commenting that there is "nothing aesthetic" about his work. Though he admitted that Powys is "a nightmare for reviewers", he affirmed that Powys enables his readers to "see, feel and smell" the English countryside.

## McCourt in the act

BY ALAN MADDRELL

There were three Irishmen - one from New York, one from Dublin and one from south London. Presiding, curiously enough, was a very English Valerie Grove. The star was (inevitably) Frank McCourt, whose *Angela's Ashes* retells a harrowing life history with a serene and inherently Irish humour. Providing excellent contrast was Wimbledon-raised John Walsh, whose middle-class suburban Catholicism sat uneasily between the well-fed sneers of English peers and the Republicanism in which his family was steeped. Dramaturg Peter Sheridan contributed a little more subtly as a "true" Irishman, whose socio-economic status lay somewhere between the two.

The Gaelic trio subconsciously seduced us into a night of anecdotes and gentle self-deprecation. Laughter (and even ultimately a hesitant song)



filled the lofty Georgian alcoves of the Main Hall.

Accusations could be made about sentimentalism, or a self-satisfaction in the Chekhovian whimsicality of being Irish, but this misses the point. The sincerity of these writers is clear when you hear McCourt reading from the one-sided lessons he used to give, or Walsh confounded at being introduced to an entire village. They told a rough tale, but like so much else, aren't bitter.

## Eat Pushkin

BY FATEMA AHMED

In the bicentenary year of Pushkin's birth, it remains a scandal that this great Russian writer is not better known in the West. However, if Antony Wood has anything to do with it, this neglect should not continue for much longer.

In *A Taste of Pushkin* Wood introduced a selection of translations which were then stirringly read by the distinguished actor Paul Greenwood. The selection itself was a tantalising glimpse into the sheer variety of Pushkin's verse - with poems ranging in tone from the mordant wit of *To a Beauty who took Snuff* to the mature reflection of *Autumn*.

Wood's elegant commentary on Pushkin's life provided a fascinating context for the poems. As for the quality of his translations - he quoted Dante Gabriel Rossetti's dictum that the object of verse translation was "not to replace a good poem with a bad poem." He need have no fears on that score.

## A great deal to Bragg about

BY STACEY REDMAN

& LUCY SERIES

Melvyn Bragg opened yesterday's event with a frank and personal account of his friendship with the late Alan Hancox, before moving on to discuss his new novel *The Soldier Returns*. Bragg reminded the audience that the purpose of writing is to "get to the marrow of who you are", and related this to the death of his father and the writing of his new novel.

*The Soldier Returns* describes the return of a soldier from fighting in the Second World War to his family, an event common not only to Bragg but many of his generation. He raised the "fatherless generation" as an issue that not only his family were reluctant to talk about, but also the British public in general.

Bragg captivated his audience with anecdotes about his research of the book, even offering to sing a song or two from his childhood! He kept up a lively rapport, receiving raucous laughter at some points and maintained their interest throughout (with the exception of a slumbering Heaney).



## What, the Dickens?

BY STEPHEN HILL

Miriam Margolyes, perhaps best known for her portrayal of 'the Nurse' in the remake of *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, has returned to these shores after taking the Americans by storm. Much of her most recent work has been on the set of period dramas and film adaptations - of which *Little Dorrit* was an award winner.

In her hit show *Dickens' Women*, Margolyes is joined by critic Barbara Hardy and Victorian scholar Michael Slater. Margolyes, "excessive in all ways", takes the stage and presents the show in a Dickensian way from a Dickensian angle, with each cast member taking a Dickens character.

Margolyes' distinctive appearance has made her instantly unforgettable. Her voice is just as recognisable as the narrator of a wide range of books; her voice mirroring her personality as brings the texts 'alive'.

## The Stoat

Overheard at Magnus Magnusson's Quiz Night: "It's good that the Festival comes to The Petit Blanc occasionally; at least you get stuffed olives here instead of stuffed shirts."

Jane from the Press Office is apparently still recovering from being seriously told off by a security guard for flashing (we assume with her camera) at Princess Anne.

### THE TEAM

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