



LITERALLY SPEAKING

Issue no.9 • FREE Edited by Glenn Carmichael & Sara-Jane Arbury

Sunday 17th October 1999

Full Time

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Glyn Maxwell is a soft-edged vendor of verse with ounces of off-the-cuff cool and a lyrical turn in almost every line. He returned to Cheltenham in honour of the late Alan Hancox, who made him the writer-in-residence 10 years ago. Performing his unpublished epic based on the legend of *The Flying Dutchman*, Maxwell read fairly fluently, although jet-lagged, laughing occasionally at his tired inability to deliver each chosen line.

His 10,000 line poem *Time's Full* is the story of a man destined to travel the train lines of Britain, released once every 7 years in order to save his soul by procuring the love of a good woman. As with most of Maxwell's work, the poem is characterised by a love of modern language mixed with a teaspoonful of classicism. When it worked it was wonderful, all too often we were left indifferent, in need of a shorter sharper shock and a little less contrivance.

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
John Hegley
Town Hall,
1.30-2.30pm

•
Maureen Lipman
Everyman, 2-3.15pm

•
Seamus Heaney
Town Hall,
5-6pm

•
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

Rhythm & Hughes

BY OLLIE GARRETT

& ADAM HOROVITZ

Erica Wagner yesterday offered a critical analysis of Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* based on the narrative of her forthcoming book *Ariel's Gift*.

Commentary focused on the poetic need for confession, disclosure and the insight these themes provide into the poet's philosophy. It was suggested that Hughes' consciousness acted as a filtering device for the translation of his emotions. *Birthday Letters* represents a striking departure from the author's earlier work. The emphasis on mythology and anthropology in his creative method makes the contrasting personal and intimate nature of *Birthday Letters* a surprising addition to the Hughes canon. The motivation behind Hughes' decision to write in this mode was attributed to "thirty years of pent-up emotion" and an awareness of impending death.

Hughes stated "I think these letters reveal a story I had been evading" and *Birthday Letters* can be seen as a cathartic release of his inner experiences with Plath. It recounts married life, love, the birth of their children and ultimately the failure of their marriage. Despite this biographical approach, attention was drawn to *Birthday Letters'* status as poetry which offers no historical solutions but many insights. The notion that *Birthday Letters* is built on Hughes' reflections on the encouragement of Plath; the consequence of which was

an artistic trajectory which ended in her death. Wagner related intriguing anecdotes of the protagonists, and though endearing, these tales affirmed a dark undercurrent in their being. For Hughes, memory has elusive qualities, particularly in the case

of happy memory.

Birthday Letters creates an astonishingly vivid image of Plath as a living woman.

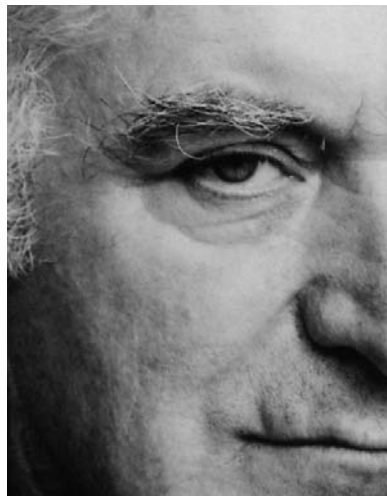
The afternoon's discussion was followed by a celebration of Hughes' life and work in

the Main Hall, with contributions from Seamus Heaney, Tim Supple, Melvyn Bragg and Michael Morpurgo. Heaney said before the show that he "...hadn't really wanted to be making more public utterances" about Hughes, but this event felt necessary, for it celebrated the complete Ted.

Through readings from his many different canons - *Tales From Ovid*, *The Iron Man*, *Lupercal* - you could hear the rich voice of Hughes booming through the ether and invigorating all who were listening. As Heaney said, "We, here, all feel small celebrating the myriad-mindedness and general largeness of Ted."

He was shown to be exactly that; a generous-spirited polymath who was as much at home with children as adults. For him, the seeing and the feeling was everything in living as well as writing.

Like *The Old Man of Hoy*, he will loom out over British poetry for many years to come.



Byronic man

BY BARBARA FAUSET

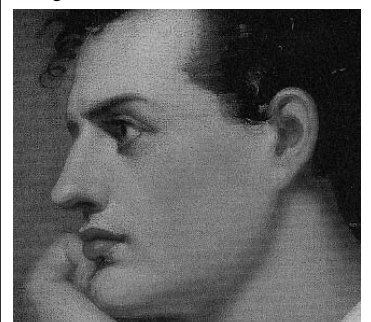
& RON CAPELL

Good friends always 'cover up' as Hobbouse did for Lord Byron when, at his death, he burnt the poet's memoirs; an act now regretted by Fiona MacCarthy as she embarked on her biography of the Romantic poet. From a life which reads like the Grand Tour: Scotland, Lisbon, Venice, Ravenna, Missolonghi, and of course, Cheltenham, she drew out the energy of a man never at ease with himself.

Enthralled by the sweep of history, Byron took us into Europe, establishing England in its Romantic tradition. An aristocrat in morality and the tenor of his mind, he increasingly took up the causes of the Carbonari and later the Greeks; his conventionality concealing a passion for freedom.

MacCarthy contextualised her infamous subject so that we saw him as the Greeks did, a passionate, sympathetic and god-like figure, transformed from years of misdirected energy. In a sexually nonchalant age, his excesses were the norm; MacCarthy remained affectionate, but not seduced in spite of her research of his love letters, locks of hair from across the continent, even the pubic hairs of Caroline Lamb.

Why is this legendary 19th century heartthrob so widely known and so little read? Is the age of the National Curriculum the antithesis of The Enlightenment?





Justice

BY FIONA BENNETT

Geoffrey Robertson QC opened his lecture at the Everyman last night with the wry quip "I don't write for money, but because of it." Considering the duty of the writer on human rights, Robertson proposed the idea in *Crimes against Humanity* of a long overdue "Millennium Shift" in our universal understanding of Justice. He noticed a transition from expediency to enforcement and, borrowing his novelist wife Kathy Lette's phrase "PMT" (Pre-Millennium Tension), he cautiously warned of the danger of a false dawn. Tracing other human rights authors, Robertson exhorted the destruction of a national sovereignty that permits "tyrants and torturers" to prosper. He predicted that the future of human rights writing lies in explaining why and when it is justifiable to kill for human rights, ending with the plea that "the writer on human rights must evoke sorrow and anger."

Basil Street Blues: the secret life of Holroyd

BY TOM HARDY

Michael Holroyd, acclaimed biographer of Bernard Shaw, Lytton Strachey and Augustus John, was described as "self-effacing" in his introduction at the Town Hall yesterday, proving it with an hour of great wit and insight.

He read three touching excerpts from his latest book *Basil Street Blues*, in which for once he turns the "biographical focus" on himself. Part family history, part autobiography, the book is littered with hilarious tales of eccentricity, particularly concerning his Swedish mother and string of step-parents.

Written with an exceptionally sensitive touch, Holroyd's narrative gives the reader a desired combination of information and "page-turning acceleration."

He described an autobiography as the book "everyone should write",



saying that it gives the writer context and place through its confrontation with human nature.

Holroyd's account of his school-days shows the reader how suited he was to writing biographies from an early age - being always the observer who "perfected the art of being overlooked."

Basil Street Blues is a voyage of discovery, untangling the threads of family myth and truth, with poignant moments of empathy for what are described as "unlived lives."

Hell-bent on Fenton

BY ROWLAND BYASS

James Fenton came to the Festival to read his poetry, much of which covers his career as a war correspondent across the world. Like his role as a journalist, his poetic voice is that of an observer, whose formal presentation of events is infused with a more personal 'I was there' immediacy.

An appreciative audience was treated to poems on subjects as diverse as Cambodian refugees struggling to make sense of a summer in Tuscany and the kaleidoscope of competing religious and secular voices of Jerusalem.

Much of what Fenton read was in ballad form, half spoken, half sung, putting the stuff of modern warfare - bombers, rockets, refugees - into an older style, which re-invigorated both form and subject.

Telling porkies

BY NISHA KUMAR & MARY FAUSET

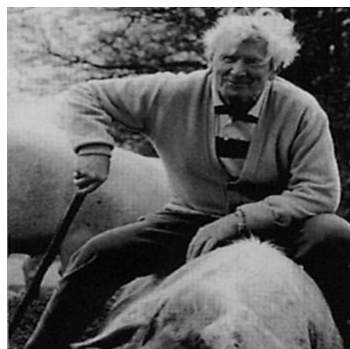
The excitement was brewing as hundreds of children piled into the Everyman to see one of the most popular children's authors around - Dick King-Smith. Clutching copies of their favourite book, from one of the 110 that he has written, they hoped for them to be signed. A hush engulfed the theatre as the long-awaited man arrived. "He's older than I thought he would be."

King-Smith began by singing a song; all his young fans were entranced. He talked about different parts of his life and read from three examples of his work - *The Topsy Turvy Story Book*, *Jungle Jingle* and *The Hodgehog*. When asked if they wanted to hear a rude poem, every child put their hand up in expectation.

King-Smith's most widely-read book *The Sheep Pig*, is the original

Babe. He told of his delight at its making: "It was a wonderful film... the follow-up was not a wonderful film, but it was nothing to do with me." Another of his books, *The Waterhorse*, is in the process of being filmed. King-Smith yesterday had adults and children alike crossing their fingers in the hope that it will be a success.

He let the children in on his most closely guarded secret - his real name. King-Smith feels most unfortunate that he was born with the Christian names Ronald Gordon.



Oh Virginia

BY CLAIRE FAUSET

Michael Cunningham claims his main fear in writing his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Hours* (inspired by the life and work of Virginia Woolf) was of being chased by irate Woolf scholars, and admits that taking her as a heroine in his book was risky. He extensively researched Woolf's work and biographies, but it was through his particular study of Hermione Lee's biography that he was really able to imagine and 'create' the character.

Popular views of Woolf can be narrow - people rarely see her as a witty conversationalist or a political figure - but *The Hours* works to free Woolf from the ivory tower of literature as it constructs and deconstructs images of the writer. Part of Woolf's brilliance, for Cunningham, is her ability to 'get Mrs Brown'; to realise the complexity and depth within everyone. This is one area in which he has taken inspiration from his heroine.

The Stoat

We are told that The Everyman's bacon butties tasted better than usual yesterday. Apparently, staff and helpers for the Dick King-Smith event couldn't keep their minds off Dick's erstwhile porcine companion.

Joseph Fiennes, while signing a sketch of himself after Glyn Maxwell's reading last night: "Is my hair really receding that much?"

THE TEAM

SUB EDITORS:
Adam Horovitz, Alan Maddrell.

STAFF JOURNALISTS:
Nisha Kumar, Mary Fauset.

ROVING REPORTER:
Jon Andriessen.