

LITERALLY SPEAKING

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• Sunday 14th October 2001

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
The Mona Lisa
Everyman
12.30-1.30pm

•
Edmund White
Town Hall
2.30-3.30pm

•
Deaf Poets' Society
Town Hall
7.45-9pm

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

Beyond Blue

BY OWEN MASON

Esther Morgan read a selection of poems from her first published collection *Beyond Calling Distance* at Café Rouge yesterday. Methodically easing her way through amusing adolescence, poignant geography and desperate solitude, she presented a mixed bag of poetic nutrition and warmed up the audience with her calm enthusiasm.

Owen Sheers, who followed, was marvellous. Reading from his first collection, *The Blue Book*, he whisked the audience through intimate events from his past - from sweet glimpses of his parents to his own tender inadequacies. He then treated us to a heart-warming selection of love poems.

This event was enriching, and thoroughly enjoyable. A cool, full Café Rouge was not disappointed.

This disarming man

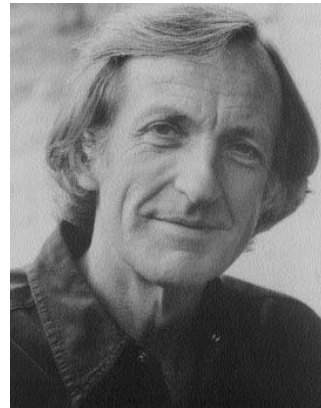
BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Time sits well on John Pilger's shoulders - a man who sees his journalistic career as a privilege, despite years of selflessness and bravery in search of truths. He sits on stage at the Everyman in black clothing - looking, ironically, like a smartly dressed hawk - and reads from his books. He starts with a cuddly description of how he started work, on a 'very different' *Daily Mirror*, employed because he was an Australian and a spin bowler to boot, but moves on rapidly to his experiences in Vietnam and Palestine.

These readings from *Heroes* ("...which hasn't been out of print since it was originally published in 1986"), rooted as they are in the past, have an uneasy sense of relevance to

now. There are grim parallels between the Palestinian containment camps in 1960's Israel, carpet bombing in Vietnam (which, amazingly, was the only war in recent history without press restrictions) and the most pressing current news stories.

Understandably, questioning after



the readings turns to the horrifying events unfolding in America and Afghanistan, and Pilger, as clear-minded in the flesh as he is in print, answers the well-informed audience in a lucid manner that he hopes will return to America "...once this dreadful, jingoistic censorship has lifted."

It has always been clear that his interest lies with the people suppressed by politics in all its forms: asked what he thinks of the word 'terrorism', he replies "It's an abstraction; all war and violence is terrorism!" This implacable foe of imperialism also believes that "We should be looking at ourselves - at our own place in the world. If we do that, then some of those people (wherever they are) won't have died in vain."

If only more people were as level-headed and honest as this.

Not so hidden Chambers

BY DANIEL HAHN

An announcement: "Melvin Burgess will not be joining us". There was a murmur of sympathy and disappointment, and some concern - what would we get instead? How would they fill the hour with just one side of a dialogue? We needn't have worried.

Aidan Chambers has an extraordinary gift, not just as a writer (which is not in question) but as a compelling and inspiring speaker. The audience, reflecting his broadest readership, was made up largely of teenagers, who listened silently to this unassuming 67-year-old man speaking about his work, the things that drive him, the things that he thinks matter. He talked about reading,



about growing up, about political philistinism and short-sightedness, about consciousness, about Simone Weil and James Joyce, and they - we - couldn't get enough of it.

His audience's responses were eloquent testament to the mood he managed to create. The first questioner was sixteen; he wasn't just answered - carefully and thoughtfully - but engaged in conversation. A conversation into which, though personal, other teenagers felt comfortable enough to venture willingly too.

Throughout the short hour, he spoke with the passion and care of someone who believes that the subjects he is discussing are the most important in the world. I think he's probably right.

Full Marx

BY ALAN MADDRELL & MIKE CHIRGWIN

Ten o'clock is an ugly hour to discuss Marx's impact on politics and culture. But Francis Wheen, discussing his recent biography, re-humanised the prophetic beard, who is either Saint or Satanist, but never human - and never an artist...

The cliché of bringing the writer to life was never truer than when we learnt of Marx's boil-ravaged bottom, his drunken vandalism or the tenderness and poverty of his family life. Even *Das Kapital* received a re-evaluation as an eclectic blend of philosophy, economics, prophecy, poetic fancy and even much-overlooked irony.

Fukuyama's concept of *The End of History* was dispatched as Wheen demonstrated that Marx is the pivotal figure not only of the twentieth century, but global economics, cultural imperialism and political thought.

Mother love

BY CANDY ROBINSON

Put Fay Weldon and Elaine Showalter in a room together and some food for thought will ensue. We were asked 'Must women always be defined as mothers or not?'

Showalter's persistent optimism bounced satisfyingly off Weldon's black and white pessimism. Both questioned whether, despite the transformation of women's lives, child-bearing and rearing had changed at all. Showalter believes that working women pushing children into childcare is perfectly acceptable. Weldon felt the only choice lay in not having children at all, frowning on those who try to do both.

Much of the discussion revolved around professional Western women, glossing over the working class or ethnic experience. The one universal truth to emerge from this discussion was Showalter's affirmation that once you've crossed that border into motherhood you've crossed it forever.

Sketch, sketch and scribble

BY ALAN MADDRELL

"I'll publish, right or wrong: / Fools are my theme, let satire be my song." Byron's lines indicate that the history of satire, not only verbal but visual, is far longer than a lot of us believe. Which is why it was heartening to hear political cartoonists Steve Bell and Martin Rowson acknowledge 1790s satirist Gilray's contribution as the founding father of the backward and unruly tradition of visual satire.

However, *Guardian* journalist Simon Hoggart let the two vicious cynics rely mostly on their own viscerally current work to make their case. The pair did reflect to some extent on the nature of their art and its possible effects, but a lot of the evening was spent wrestling with the OHP, eliciting many a wise cackle from the more disillusioned Cheltenham worthies.

They heard tell of how Michael



Heseltine snapped up the first depiction of him in his role as Tarzan, only to back out when he was asked to make the cheque out to CND. We were regaled with Bell's recurrent image of Cheltenham veteran John Major in his smalls, and we heard of the curious ongoing relationship each has with Peter Mandelson.

Anecdotes also figured heavily, from the Christmas cards Rowson receives from Gordon Brown (whose bum still looks big in Rowson's cartoons) to Steve Bell's image of a can of beans suddenly striking him at the Labour conference. Overall, the pair showed themselves to be reckless iconoclasts devoid of any misplaced optimism.

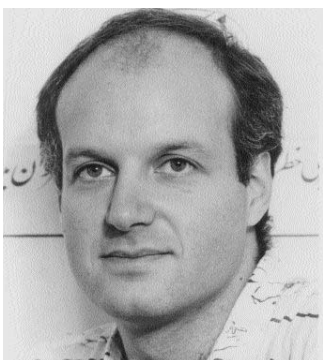
They seemed to genuinely care for the audience, going so far as to show images currently in legal proceedings. And if you want to know what's going to be happening in Monday's *Guardian*; well, just ask the Afghan goat.

Shots in the dark

BY NIKKI SHEEHAN

Since September 11th Nick Danziger has been very popular. The photographer, who was famously described as seeking out danger the way other men seek sex, has visited Afghanistan 40 times over the last 23 years. Danziger was joined at the Playhouse by celebrated photo-journalist Don McCullin, whose portraits of war have exposed him to scenes which have robbed him forever of a sound night's sleep.

Aided by Eamonn McCabe, Danziger and McCullin discussed their dramatic lives and the degradation of their subjects with a sensitivity that made viewing pictures from their latest books almost painful.



Danziger's photos were dramatic and sometimes humorous, like the shot of a dalmatian catching a frisbee in a squalid British room (the dog's young owner was so wasted on heroin that he couldn't take it out), or children on a run-down Belfast estate jumping off a roof for fun. But McCullin's work is darker, almost biblical, whether showing third world-style poverty in Bradford or the haunting image of a starving Biafran albino child. McCullin described finding

his subject matter as like turning over boulders on a beach; you always find other life forms going on. Neither photographer wants to cover the current attacks on Afghanistan. With the humanity and dignity they impart to their subjects, more's the pity.

A new India

BY JON ANDRIESSEN

It's always nice to discover new talent, but it's especially nice when it comes in twos. Shamim Sarif was joined by Ruchir Joshi to read from and discuss their debut novels, *the world unseen* and *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. What these two books have in common is their origins in a rich Indian culture, past, present and future, something a certain Nobel winner would do well to take note of.

Sarif explores the lives of an Indian family in 1950s South Africa, incorporating the many twists of the apartheid regime which she believes may still exist.

Joshi's tale is a strange mix of love and violence played through a century of ever changing ideals and expectations. It was a joy to hear the two read with such enthusiasm and obvious pride in spite of many unnecessary interruptions.

Do not just buy these books, read them and find out for yourselves!

The Stoat

Craig Raine was mistaken for Steve Bell by one eager journalist yesterday. It seems Raine is not available for any freelance cartooning in spite of his beard. Well, they all look the same...

They're zippy, they're programmable, you don't have to pay them or feed them. No, not Festival volunteers, but DK's Ultimate Robots. Thanks for the free samples, DK.

THE TEAM

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