

LITERALLY SPEAKING

sponsored by

C&G Cheltenham & Gloucester

Issue no. 5 • FREE • edited by Stet Press • Wednesday 17th October 2001

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
Odysseus
Town Hall
4-5pm

•
Sebastian Faulks
Everyman
8.45-10pm

•
Murder Squad
Council Chamber
Municipal Offices
8-9.30pm

•
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

Blairingly Oblivious

By JON ANDRIESEN

There was once a time when a debate 'centring' on a serving Prime Minister and their government would have stood people's hackles on end. What was most outstandingly worrying about Nick Clarke, Andrew Rawnsley and Anthony Seldon's little conflagration was that no one really exploded into more than the odd snipe and occasional mild fluster. Can it really be that we are all very happy? Have Tony's Brylcreemed spinners left us holding out the alms box, grateful for what we get? Or is the apathy apparent in the last general election proof positive that no one actually cares?

Clarke, the reassuringly unemotional voice of Radio 4's *World at One*, held the chair, shooting such questions as 'Can Tony Blair juggle war and domestic policy?' Both recipients decided in the negative and went on to proclaim he could stay in

power for another twenty years.

Rawnsley's honest interpretation that 'Blair brought values and no policies' was similarly supported by Seldon who stated that there 'was no strength in depth to the Labour Party.'

I would say more, but perhaps this is a good time to bury bad news.



Born to act

By FIONA ROSS

Walking into the theatre at Bournside School this afternoon, we were immediately transported to the India of our imaginations - incense prickling the nostrils, Indian flutes and drums echoing our ears and cascades of colour as ninety 9-11 year olds entered the space.

Played in the round, Jo Bousfield's seamless and sensitive adaptation of Jamila Gavin's *Three Indian Princesses*, a powerful story of love, courage and death, enthralled an attentive audience. The young actors performed with obvious enjoyment, bringing humour to this thought-provoking narrative. Most notable was a posse of princes - including Muhammed Ali, Elvis and 007, who formed the lineup of prospective husbands for the princesses of the title.

I would have liked to have been able to stay for the second performance!

Sinclair's urban spectrum

By DANIEL HAHN

I'm convinced that Iain Sinclair leads a charmed life. He lives, he says, in a world with 'narratives just lying around', ready to be gathered, if you but look and listen well. Most of his research consists simply of roaming around places which allow you to 'detour or stop and meditate', as he does in the body of most of the writing itself.

He read two passages from *Landor's Tower*. As often in his work, *Landor's Tower* falls in a shady middle ground between being a fiction and what he calls a 'document'. Dealing in familiar Sinclair themes - landscape and memory - it's set not in his customary East London but in his native Wales.



Interesting as he is talking about this book, he is more original and revealing describing his thoughts behind his work in general. As an example, he describes the project he's currently working on - a typical ramble around the fringes of London (the hugely atmospheric M25). He muses

on the ways in which traces of the capital's essence have drifted into the landscape of the periphery; how the very buildings are repositories of the capital's stories. Landscape and memory again, then. This is a man who knows his strengths.

Indeed no-one can do echoing urban landscape quite like him. And it's a pleasant surprise to discover that he talks just as he writes - I'd recognise those sentences anywhere.

Tying up the loose ends

By ALAN MADDRELL

If you are ever asked over for dinner by Ned Sherrin or Antony Jay, I'd recommend filling up beforehand, much as you would before a barbecue. Why? You'd be likely to receive the equivalent of the buffet bar served to the *Everyman* last night by two editors of dictionaries of quotations.

The pair swapped literary and political canapés, lettuce, popadums and prawn crackers like boys exhibiting their masculine conkers in late September. Sherrin, a master of the art, has spent a full two hours at the *Everyman* in the past recounting theatrical anecdotes. And who better than Antony Jay of *Yes, Minister* fame to lend some political gravitas to proceedings? That's relative gravitas, of



course, like a crouton tucked between some lettuce and a slice of tomato.

One of the major difficulties in compiling such polystyrene fare is the necessity of attributing the quote not only to its originator but to its quoter. Of course, there's always a way to sneak in the unattributed (take note of each book's mammoth introduction), so both performers agreed that this was their most enjoyable task to date. Similarly, Sherrin (editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*) had to avoid jokes which might better fit in one of Bob Monkhouse's databases.

But that's about as trying as things get in the post-modern world of quotations - laughs abound, the wise cackle and the audience still feels peckish at about ten o'clock.

The fall of Ussher

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

When was *The Birth of Time*? Was it, as Archbishop James Ussher believed, on the 22nd of October 4004 BC at 6pm (if so, we'd better start blowing up balloons in a few days time)? Was it, as the Comte de Buffon suggested, about 75,000 years ago? Or was it, as some smart aleck in



the audience suggested, when the first man capable of rational thought decided to call that irritating experience which involved things changing 'Time'?

Ussher's theory apparently gained credence after it was printed in a popular bible, and only became fully out-moded early last century after minds as diverse as Darwin's, Kelvin's (a religious scientist who got quite hot under the collar about Darwin's *The Origin of Species*) and Hubble's, had given it a good drubbing.

Martin Gorst, in his fascinating illustrated talk, offered no absolute conclusions, instead leading the audience on a labyrinthine amble around the jumbled dogmas (both religious and scientific) that have littered this timeless debate over centuries.

To end, Gorst quoted Saint Augustine who, when asked what God was doing before time began, apparently replied 'Making Hell for people who ask questions like that!' Well, quite!

A beauty not canvas deep

BY CANDY ROBINSON

'It's the end of an era, the end of the sublime'. So began Wendy Steiner's stimulating illustrated talk on 'the trouble with beauty'. Via references to the predominance of the female form as a carrier of beauty in 19th century art, we were invited to examine the challenge posed to that notion by 20th century art. Artists like Picasso, Steiner maintained, were involved in the process of changing one type of beauty into another. When we look at 20th century High Art we are invited to look at the beauty of form and line, think differently of two dimensional space, rather than ponder the beauty of a particular female form.

Among the varied slides we were shown were many that portrayed the idea of femininity as masquerade and Steiner began and ended the series with a painting entitled *The Image as Burden*. The tenets of beauty are not impervious to politics, she said, and

we were invited to consider the encumbrance of the beautiful image as it related to women. Why is it that we are not prepared to accept the work of a performance artist disfiguring herself to show that beauty hurts but are happy to see images of women as the finished article, the pain of body modification hidden from the viewer's gaze?

A challenging and rewarding event.



Chewing the facts

BY TOBY JOY

In the comfortable surroundings of The Queen's Hotel, those present at *Café Philo* were invited to disagree on the topic 'Is art made tongue-tied by authority?' and there was no shortage of eager speakers. Roy Hattersley immediately gave us the definitive answer (that 'it depends') and went on to explain how literature was dominated by oppression, whether direct or otherwise.

Shakespeare was a victim, most notably in his history plays, whilst allusions were made to the works of Waugh, Miller, Marlowe and Ondaatje amongst others; a diverse

group to say the least. A consensus was soon reached that oppression actually led to more emotive writing, which, apparently, can only be a good thing.

Roy (accompanied by a number of grey-haired members of the audience) alleged that post-war novels are 'bland' due to the fact that society is 'flat'. Some of the Festival's other speakers might disagree, but few in the audience did. Gerard Kilroy kept the conversation flowing, and a rich exchange of views was the result. Roy even proposed next year's topic, 'What is the author's obligation to society?' See you there.



Good Qwertations

BY JANINA KARPINSKA

Visual poet David Petts became roving reporter for the day with his vintage Olivetti typewriter; on a 'speech bubble' trail from the Everyman to the Art Gallery via Waterstone's, Casa and Squeeze for *Voices Off* event *Qwert Unquert*.

Looking out for sayings that were haunting, taunting, amusing or confusing, most appeared to be 'x'-rated when it came to grappling with the dated technicalities of a machine that couldn't delete at the touch of a button, but hey! Hunter Davies did say: 'Don't get it right, get it written'. Or, you could 'go to class 2 and ask for a can of initiative' (ouch!). 'Too idle to shiver? Then don't go into industry...' (from 'a depressed dad').

Should that drive you to drink and you find yourself at the Everyman bar, you might need to consider how to 'use your leisure wisely'; failing that: 'Look at the glass as half full.'

The Stoat

Festival volunteer to *Literally Speaking* editor in the Writer's Room: 'You know, I've been nice to you for the last couple of hours because I thought you were a famous author! Umm...not that I won't be since you aren't!'

Terry Pratchett overheard: 'I'm not a rich man, I'm just a poor man with money!' Sympathetic postcards to the usual address!

THE TEAM

EDITORS:

Jon Andriessen, Sara-Jane Arbury & Adam Horovitz

DEPUTY EDITORS:

Michael Chirgwin, Alan Maddrell

© on articles remains with the authors

Banner photograph sponsored by
Oxford Scientific Films / Hjalmar R. Bardarson
Tel: 01993 881881 www.osf.uk.com