

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE  
TUESDAY 12 OCTOBER 2004  
ISSUE 4/FREE/EDITED BY STET PRESS



## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### STELLA RIMINGTON

TOWN HALL/2.45-3.45PM

The former MI5 Director ventures into fiction.

### HG WELLS

EVERYMAN/6-7.15PM

Iain Sinclair and Bryan

Appleyard discuss the visionary author.

### LET'S PLAY SCRABBLE

CENTRAL LIBRARY/7.15-8.15PM

Spend a night on the tiles with the voices off Scrabble show.

### PETER TATCHELL

TOWN HALL/7.15-8.15PM

Campaigner Peter Tatchell takes to the stage in the keynote Queer Nation lecture.

### JANET STREET-PORTER

EVERYMAN/8.45-10PM

'Yoof' TV architect and chief rambler Janet Street-Porter discusses her life and career.

## THE MANY FACES OF SHER

### ADAM HOROVITZ

**It takes quite an actor to fill, at short notice, the boots of Ian Holm, be it on stage at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature or anywhere else. Thankfully, Sir Antony Sher is quite an actor.**

Looking, in his current guise, a little like a faun who has tired of following Dionysus and has traded in his goaty legs for smart trousers, Sher charmed the crowd yesterday with an avuncular grin and a host of pertinent theatrical and literary anecdotes. He was here to celebrate the twentieth anniversary re-release of *The Year of the King*, his behind-the-scenes look at the run up to performing Richard III, the role that made his name, but the event was as much a look at his entire career as anything. The audience wouldn't have had it any other way.

A very physical actor, he spoke a little about how he had researched the role of the crippled king and particularly about the crutches that had made the part. They had nearly not been used, he said: 'Very good ideas are often very close to bad ideas and it's often hard to tell which is which.'



It is clear from *The Year of the King* that research matters to Sher – everything he saw had a bearing on that role – and that has run through to his current production, *Primo*, an adaptation, by Sher, of Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*. He spoke of how moved he was visiting Auschwitz with the precise 'scientist's analysis' of the book running in his head. 'Every human being on earth should be made to go to Hiroshima and Auschwitz,' he said. 'Maybe we'd become a more peaceful people...' Writing for the stage has, naturally, become a passion, especially since his career as a novelist seems to have fizzled out. His first novel,

*Middlepost*, received excellent notices, but: 'The literary world is a sort of club... and for some reason I wasn't let in. The way they let you know is they don't review your book or they review it late.' So he's sticking to writing plays. If the reviews for *Primo* are anything to go by, this is the theatre world's gain.

Sher got into acting watching the many faces of Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers. 'I was enchanted by the idea that you can build a different face... I've moved away from that now.' He is much more interested in displaying – 'like Judi Dench' – an inner light. 'It's got something to do with being at peace with myself,' he said with a smile. Like many great actors, he has an aesthete's approach to words, particularly Shakespeare. Shakespeare, he said, 'does what a great jazz musician can do and plays around the beat' of iambic pentameter, unlike Marlowe who 'thumps on and on' with the mighty line.

Sher is an impassioned man. The inner light he quests after when he acts was on proud display last night – and the audience basked in it.

## PRINCE OF THIEVES

### JON ANDRIESSEN

***Klepto*, Steve Tasane's new one-man show, is a gleefully eclectic celebration of his years of poetic petty pilfering. Through pure charm and comic persuasion, Tasane shared a retail therapy trip he seldom had to pay for. 'The bigger the better,' he told us, recounting the tale of a two-man tent liberated from Millets in a bag so small 'it looked like a snake had eaten a goat'. He does, however, assure us his larcenous days are well and truly over.**

In *Klepto*, Tasane has created a metaphoric masterpiece of hope, helplessness, ambition and desire. 'I took up shoplifting to support my art, but my art became shoplifting.' This curious mismatch of talents combined to produce his first novel, *Birds of Prey*, on a stolen typewriter, with stolen paper, sold to a bookshop on sale or return and then stolen back, ad infinitum. It was at this stage that he realised the awful

absurdity of the situation: 'Nobody was reading the book.'

In a final and furious blurring of the lines, Tasane offered us a greater truth: the irrelevance of kleptomania given the social and cultural theft perpetrated by Global Capitalism. Suddenly, those simple desires of the shoplifter – eating, drinking, dressing up and camping – seemed a very small price to pay.



## EVOLUTIONARY TAILS

### AVRIL STAPLE

**Following the shocking headlines regarding the rise of CO2 levels in the atmosphere, Richard Dawkins was asked about possible implications on future evolution at the Everyman Theatre yesterday.**

He replied that although he was no crystal-ball gazer, he suspected that after the fall of humankind the rodents would rule. Rodents, who already make up forty per cent of the mammal population on earth, are the tenth rendezvous of a possible thirty-nine identified when travelling backwards from humanity to find the origins of life.

In his beautifully presented book *The Ancestor's Tail*, Dawkins takes us through the evolutionary history of humankind, visiting armadillos, jellyfish and cauliflowers on the way to identifying the grand ancestor of all life. At each of these points diversity, prompted by natural selection, has taken us on a tangent that has meant

we didn't grow wings or clamber back into the sea.

Of all the revelations made possible by scientific breakthroughs in the study of DNA, the hippo's story is perhaps the strangest of all. It may not be so surprising that it is closer to the pig than the cow, but stranger still is that its closest relative of all is the whale.

When asked if he believed in a divine spark that kick-started the evolutionary process Dawkins said that it would be a 'risky way to think'. How could we accept the scientific explanation of evolutionary process and imagine that it began via divine intervention. What was the point in 'hiding in a corner science hasn't managed to penetrate yet'?

Dawkins maintained that the possibility of life existing at all was thunderingly improbable but he still holds firm to the belief that the universe is 'teeming with life'.

## BANG ON

ADAM HOROVITZ

**After Simon Singh's engaging talk on the Big Bang theory at The Everyman on Sunday, Literally Speaking decided to put to the test his claim that he could explain the theory coherently in under 10 minutes. So I interviewed him in Matcham's Restaurant after the event.**

Singh is an enthusiastic man, whose love of science is as spiky and in-er-face as his hairstyle. He sits, and within moments he is illustrating the beginnings of the universe, demonstrating the Doppler Shift with 'Eeeeeeeoooooww' car noises, making lightning fast references to Hubble, microwaves, red galaxies and much, much more.

'To start with, all matter, energy and light would have been crammed together,' he told me, 'and then as it expanded the light escaped.'

It's fair to say that he crammed the theory into our brief interview in much the same way as the universe began and you could see a Doppler Shift taking place throughout the room as first the people sat nearby turned to listen in, followed shortly afterwards by others in the room.

'Humans are naturally curious and we just want to know about the world around us,' he said. 'It seems obvious to me to want to know where the universe came from. Has it been here forever, was there a finite history, how was it created, where will it end? It seems gobsmackingly obvious that people would want to know this.' He leans forward to pound home his point: 'There are particularly profound questions which emerge – life exists in our universe; it didn't have to be that way! We have a certain level of gravity. Gravity could have been stronger or weaker. We've got Goldilocks gravity, not too strong, not too weak. Just right. Everything's just tuned for life.'

We move onto the Vatican's involvement in the nascent theories that led to the formation of the Big Bang theory. At first they were violently opposed to it, censuring the great astronomer Galileo. 'But when it came to the Big Bang,' says Singh as Pauline McLynn, who played Mrs Doyle in *Father Ted*, chuckles noisily in the background, 'the Pope loved it because it was like a scientific view of creation. The fact that the Pope loved it didn't mean it was right – the communists hated it because it smacked of Creationism and God so cosmologists ended up in the gulag. You might have a theory; it doesn't matter how important you are or how beautiful that theory is, it's got to match reality.'

Sat in the restaurant at the beginning of the universe, I have a far better idea of how everything began, thanks to the enthusiasm of Simon Singh. It only took seven minutes!

## THE RINGS CYCLE

DANIEL HAHN

**'There's no way the Greeks will pull it together in time.' 'The main stadium isn't going to be ready.' 'The transport will be a disaster.' 'It'll all run wildly over budget.' But the doomsayers were proved wrong. At the eleventh hour the city was ready (or at least ready enough), and the Games were a triumph. The year, 1896. Familiar?**

A century later, when the host city for the 2004 Games was announced, Michael Llewellyn Smith was British ambassador in Athens. As such he was involved in what he obliquely called 'commercial interests in the early stages of preparation'. But his very pleasant talk didn't expand on these potentially fascinating and shady machinations, preferring to concentrate on the story of 1896, and how 2004 had measured up...

The triumphant 1896 Games also had its problems. The marble stadium was incomplete on the opening day, and had to be filled out with whitewashed wooden benches (hoping that nobody would notice); inclement April weather forced the cancellation of the yachting events; and one of the swimmers (having travelled 4000 miles to take part) found the water of the Aegean rather too cold to compete in, leaping out at first contact crying 'Jesus, it's cold!' The Games stayed away for a century after that.



Even the philhellene Llewellyn Smith recognized that the much-praised 2004 Games was far from impeccable. The negative coverage from the British press, he said, was 'disgraceful'. And there were days when the public seemed more interested in drugs scandals than medal tables. In 1896 there had been no such problem; earlier in that year a Welsh cyclist had attempted to enhance his performance in a UK competition by taking tiny doses of strychnine, but he didn't turn up to perform in Athens. Because he was dead. The scandals of 2004 seem rather benign in comparison.

## THE CLICK & THE DEAD

ROGER TURNER

**Humans can make about 120 different sounds with their mouths, although English makes do with about 40. Neil Bannun used a whole range of strange clicks and clonks quite without embarrassment throughout the course of his talk on one of the many long forgotten 'click languages'.**

These strange sounds are simply a reserve of possibilities no longer used outside southern Africa. The noises are not integral to the language structure, since related languages use differing selections of



(odd) sounds. Neil Bannun's lecture turned out to be more about the legends of one particular hunter-gatherer culture, now extinct – name unpronounceable by you or me. These were recorded by a 19th-century German philologist on 12,000 sheets of paper, which lay neglected for decades in a Cape Town library. As well as studying these, Bannun spent quite some time studying rock paintings along the Orange River – which turn out to have remarkable similarities to the cave paintings in southern France.

More interesting than the legends (which do go on a bit) were Bannun's general observations: agriculture is only 10,000 years old, and reached south of the Limpopo only about 2,000 years ago. Before then there were 90,000 years of hunter-gathering; and to get back into that world would tell us a great deal about the human race. Certain tribes were resistant to the missionaries and their notions of right and wrong, property, seasons, present, past and future – these, it seems, are merely the products of agriculture.

## FOOTSTEPS OF A SAINT

ROBERT MORELAND

**Saint Paul was a great figure of Christianity. His letters are the earliest Christian documents to be written contemporaneously. They reflect his nature: passionate, encouraging, poetic and full of charm and religious imagination.**

At the heart of any religious controversy there is Paul, whether it is in his attitude to Judaism, homosexuality or women priests. However, Edward Stourton, talking about his book *In the Footsteps of St Paul* has some notes of caution. He doubts that the words attributed to Paul about women were written by him. He stresses that his views were very provisional and have to be placed in the context of his age. He points out that Paul was obviously in error in his implications that the second coming was not far away.

Where there was a row there was Paul. Stourton, a *Today* presenter for BBC Radio 4, thinks Paul would be a lousy interviewer (he talked far too much), but a wonderful interviewee. He clearly revelled in the controversy his polemical and declamatory letters created. Stourton related Paul to modern politics, claiming that he clearly influences Bush. He related his subject to fundamentalism, showing that religions are far more diverse than often thought (he drew attention to the recent developments in Indonesia).

Clearly Stourton is enthusiastic about Paul. Paul, he said, was after all not a soft person, 'he was spiky'. Just imagine the interview on *Today*!

## THE STOAT

**Shortly before his Cheltenham event, *Holes* author Louis Sachar had read to a packed Albert Hall. Not so long ago no-one had heard of Sachar, but now *Holes* sales have broken the half-a-million mark. 'Now we know,' said Sachar on Saturday, 'how many *Holes* it takes to fill the Albert Hall.'**

**Sir Antony Sher has a synaesthete's approach to acting the classics, it would appear. 'The language becomes something you can taste,' he said last night. 'Shakespeare and Marlowe are no more alike than grilled sole and steak.' Food for thought, says The Stoat.**