

LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 2004
ISSUE 6/FREE/EDITED BY STET PRESS



TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

SALLY MAGNUSSON

TOWN HALL/2.30-3.30PM

A touching portrait of Magnus Magnusson and Iceland.

WILLIAM HAGUE: PITT THE YOUNGER

TOWN HALL/6-7PM

William Hague's youthful insight into Britain's longest serving PM.

PLAY IN A DAY PLAYHOUSE/7-9PM

Local actors perform *Jekyll and Hyde*, scripted, rehearsed and choreographed in just 24 hours.

ART + POWER TOWN HALL/8-9PM

Join the renowned Bristol-based art group for extracts from *Faustus*.

JONATHAN MILLER EVERYMAN/8.45-10PM

Going *Beyond the Fringe* to Cheltenham for a discussion on the state of our culture.

THE JAMESIAN VERSION

JON ANDRIESEN

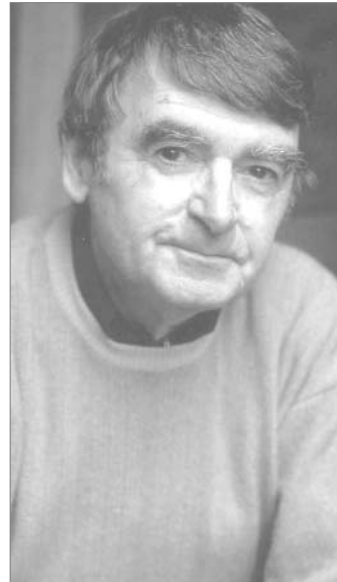
As a novelist and literary critic, David Lodge has become a byword amongst readers for quality and consistency. In a new departure, Lodge has taken the risk of turning his back on modern life and plunged into the world of semi-biographic historical fiction with *Author, Author*, the story of Henry James.

Lodge's relationship with James was not always a positive one; his first introduction 'was unfortunately a book called *The Sacred Fount*, a book even James' enthusiasts consider odd and eccentric'; but despite this early setback a few serendipitous encounters eventually led him to write the account of the man's 'ironic life'.

Although James is one the bestselling classic American authors today, he never really met with the success he craved in life. For Lodge, it was important to whittle down the author's 'long and crowded life' to the smaller, more telling moments of his failure in order to resurrect him through his latter days of only 'partial' success.

With the help of actress Bella Merlin, Lodge expertly portrayed the calamitous tragedy that was the

opening night of *Guy Domville*, James' ill-fated West End play of 1895. Lodge's mix of historical fact and carefully invented dialogue mixed a memorable scene so absurd you couldn't make it up. James himself was so anxious about the play he



decided to watch – and abhor – Wilde's hugely successful *An Ideal Husband*. He couldn't abide Wilde's sentimental humour and the fact the audiences 'loved it' – something he would never see in his lifetime. Meanwhile, his own play was received so disastrously the audience had only stayed for a humiliating laugh and sing-song at James' expense.

Notable drama critics in the theatre that night included the inexperienced George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells and, filing for *Woman Magazine* – a mildly feminist forum with the strapline, 'Forward, but not too Fast!' – was the admirable Arnold Bennett. Unsurprisingly, the reviews were less than flattering.

Sadly though, in Lodge's opinion, James' great novels are now only accessible to 'those with a university education,' given their complex syntactical structures. 'They will never be popular with those people that read airport bestsellers.' Let's hope that doesn't restrict the readership of *Author, Author* – and, if it doesn't, it may even inspire a few Jilly Cooper fans to cross over the literary landscape one day.

SLAK HAPPY VERSE

AVRIL STAPLE

A warm and intimate audience applauded three very different poets last night at Slak.

Leicester poet Steve Rooney began the evening with some audience participation on his poem 'Shite' and went on to use his gentle satirical style to talk about broken relationships. He ended his first set with an unusual rendition of 'Jerusalem'. Not a bad singing voice.

He was followed by Kat Francoise, winner of the first televised Poetry Slam on BBC 3 last week. Hers was a fast slam – almost singing – style, bordering on rap. She described herself as a 'Daughter of Eve' in one of her poems and didn't pull any punches when setting down exactly what she wanted from a man.

The highlight of the evening was Rory Motion who was apparently 'born, bread and buttered' in the Black Country. He is now a Riparian (yes, really). He entertained us with

tight rhythm and rhyme, accompanied by his guitar and a glockenspiel he played with a protrusion from his head. Honest. He even performed one poem in French, which was slightly more comprehensible than his impression of a Yorkshire accent.



THE QUEEN AND I

PETER WYTON

About two minutes into his talk yesterday, I became convinced that Gyles Brandreth was actually Derek Nimmo, in one of his celebrated dog-collar roles. The idea occurred to me as I watched the speaker. The moment I closed my eyes, it became totally irresistible.

Having convinced myself on this point, it therefore followed that the Rev. Nimmo, or Brandreth, whichever, must be preaching from a text. The text was simply, 'it works.' What 'works', to make my meaning clear, is the marriage of Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh. It works, in essence, in spite of the rest of us, whether we are royalists, republicans, sycophants, paparazzi, whatever.

I don't know what the rest of the congregation thought of the sermon, but this parishioner was, on the whole, moderately converted to the notion of two people living the ultimate goldfish-bowl existence, yet

sustaining a relationship to their mutual satisfaction. This despite the absolutely ceaseless pressure of headlines, family calamities and the inane opinions of seemingly limitless lunatic individuals – some of whom are not even members of the Privy Council. Almost undoubtedly no married couple in the history of the world has ever been subjected to the microscopic scrutiny which the Queen and Duke have suffered for the better part of 60 years.

A cartoon in *The Sunday Times* portrayed Gyles (now Derek) Brandreth as saying 'Yes ma'am, no ma'am, three bags full (of dosh) ma'am.' I'm sure there is going to be money to be made out of this book. On balance, I think his unhygienic, non-headline-seeking approach will be worth more than the drivel you'll read in all next Sunday's papers put together, and the next Sunday's, and the next, forever and ever, Amen.

FABBER & FABBER

ADAM HOROVITZ

Faber and Faber's poetry list, set in motion in the 1920s by TS Eliot, celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. Cheltenham celebrated last night with a reading by three of the list's most diverse talents, Andrew Motion, Jo Shapcott and Tom Paulin.

These are some of the poets who, as Paul Keegan, introducing, told us have 'taken up the burden of the Faber list'; it includes such greats as Ezra Pound, Auden and Louis MacNiece. The reading started with the earthy delights of Jo Shapcott, whose poems last night celebrated everything from baldness to urination.

This last was in 'Piss Flower', in which she told us that 'I can't begin to write my name/even my pet name/in the snow'; the poem drew a tittering response, as well as a few muted cries of recognition from the women in the audience. 'Don't encourage me!' laughed Shapcott. Why not? It seems well worth it given the strength of her reading last night. She closed with samples from 'The Roses', an exploration of the symbolism of that flower in all its forms, connected as it is with femininity, genitalia and love.

Tom Paulin, the irascible hyper-confident critic and academic, was something of a surprise – he reads as you imagine a rabbit might, offered the choice between staring at oncoming headlights or reading poetry, though he claims later that 'readings are fun'. You have to tune in carefully to catch the cadences, but it's well worth it.

He read from *The Road to Inver*, his collection of verse translations written over 40 years, which threw up some wonderful, dark and skewed imagery; here's one from Victor Hugo's 'Contemplation 27': 'like grey underpants/they carry the stain of the provincial/and can find nobody/to admire their vernacular'.

Andrew Motion read last, from a selection of new poems. The first was a memory of his mother – 'a visitation', and one of the few poems he has written quickly – called 'Drawing the Curtains'. A lyrical and lovely piece, it seems to have benefited from the speed of its release. This is not to say that his other poems suffer from being worked on, merely that this one had a direct and emotional impact.

His sequence of poems about birds was especially notable; 'a little old-fashioned' perhaps, but no worse for that. The densely rhymed and alliterated celebration of 'Sparrow' – 'creeper-sleeper/dung-dobbler – was an absolute joy.

This was a worthy celebration of 75 years of Faber poetry. One can't help but be hopeful for the next 75.

MEACHER TO GO THE GREEN MILE

ROB PAGE & JOSH SELLERS

'Climate change is the biggest challenge mankind has ever faced.' This was the message Michael Meacher delivered as he concluded his lecture on the Green Nation. He was introduced to the stage after a fitting tribute to the environmental campaigners, John Moore and his wife Lucille. Moore's belief that all nature is a miracle was the very message Meacher broadcast throughout his lecture.

Beginning by acknowledging the improvements that have been made to water and air quality, he then set about a realistic overview of the damage that Britain was causing to its environment. 'The environment is our quality of life,' he declared before



naming and shaming primary factors that harm the planet. These include lack of energy efficiency in home construction, extreme proportions of waste in landfills and the pollution from ever-growing motor and airline industries.

With his blunt approach to the problems we are facing as a country, he observed that it is a global affair, with America contributing vast amounts of waste and still refusing to sign the Kyoto agreement. Meacher wasn't being pessimistic, merely practical – recognising that humans rarely confront challenges. He maintained that the government follows the demands of capitalism and often turns its head and refuses to accept the here and now. Meacher however, as a confessed optimist, was quick to offer solutions; the most radical of which was a system where domestic carbon levels are issued annually to households, with a financial punishment and reward scheme providing incentive.

Using collective terms, Meacher conveyed this message to the audience as individuals: that with committed responsibility for fossil fuels – including 'thinking again' about 'sports utility vehicles' – and government backing, environmental preservation can be achieved.

THE WINGS OF DESIRE

ROSE DILLON

It is an ancient story with a very modern air to it. The story of Icarus has often been thought to symbolize the folly of man's over-ambition. Yesterday, however, Rory MacLean brought a new perspective to the myth when he explained his attempt to undertake Icarus' flight.

In a poignant description of his mother's death from cancer, MacLean underlined the reasons behind this extraordinary expedition and explained 'at this most vulnerable point in my life, with my umbilical cord having been cut, I decided to follow my intuition.'

From being 'content as a passenger' MacLean admitted that his decision to fly occurred after his sister opened a window to 'let her [mother's] soul go' and that he 'wanted to fly... to be with her'. It is intuition that led MacLean to move to Crete and construct his own flying machine from 'materials at hand' with the 'raw, unpredictable energy' of local Cretans in a setting that is the 'twilight where history and leisure meet'. MacLean viewed his experience as a spiritual journey and

said 'that closure has brought me back to earth'.

Although he admitted that he had 'not flown very high, nor for very long' MacLean's talk was both illustrative and inspirational and his achievement is something to be truly proud of. For this man, however, pride did not come at the expense of a fall.



CONTINENT DRIFTERS

KATHRYN HARPER

'What I really love about travelling is coming home,' said Tobias Hill. Ben Okri refers to it as 're-entry'. Maggie Gee agrees that those first impressions when you arrive and return are incredibly striking. 'It's when you notice that there is too much of everything here,' she said. But that soon wears off.

What perhaps will not wear off as readily is the impact of their experiences as part of the Across Continents initiative. Last year, they were given about a month's notice to pack their bags and set off for Mexico (Hill) and Uganda (Gee). Their counterparts – Ugandan writer Ayeta Anne Wangusa and Mexican writer Mauricio Montiel – were similarly invited to the UK. They were each commissioned to write an e-mail diary and a short story.

The challenge of the diaries wasn't necessarily writing them or even finding internet cafés in Uganda and Mexico. According to Tobias, you can find a local village, two mules and an internet café almost anywhere in Mexico. The challenge lay more in completing the diary entry before the power blacked out.

The experience has certainly influenced Gee as she has recently completed a new novel set in Britain and Uganda. Tobias was less clear on influences but he has been writing poetry since his return and there was a Mexican character in one of the poems he read.

THE STOAT

'There's a sort of freemasonry among poets,' said Tom Paulin of the reading circuit. There has to be it seems. 'We're not novelists, we don't get huge advances!'

Gyles Brandreth refused to be photographed yesterday until he'd brushed his hair. He was relieved to be directed to a mirror and shortly afterwards was seen to pull a pink hairbrush out of his suitcase and preen himself for the waiting press.

'It's nice to be back in Cheltenham,' said David Lodge at The Everyman last night. 'I haven't dared show my face here ever since I invented a university called Cheltenham and Gloucester, just a year before they actually founded it.' A case of life imitating art?