

INTRODUCTION

Plays and Playwrights 2002 brings together ten new plays by ten talented writers who you've probably never heard of; I'm betting that soon you'll be hearing more about—and from—all of them. One of the things I hope this volume does is present a picture of what the New York theatre scene looked and felt like during the past twelve months or so. To that end, you'll find on the pages that follow ten very different, very adventurous plays. There's a romantic verse epic about King Arthur and an intimate verse drama based on a novel by Balzac; there's a suspenseful tale of graverobbers and anatomists set in seventeenth century England and a tale from Japan about good and evil recast in contemporary Brooklyn. There are experimental and innovative works that stretch and re-imagine our expectations about theatre: a pageant interweaving three very different plays into a single—and singular—dramatic experience; a comic mystery that morphs unexpectedly into a Pirandellian exploration of the nature of reality; an episodic collection of vignettes and sketches that add up to an imaginative and surprising look at a boy's coming of age. There's a hilarious and profane comedy that looks danger squarely in the eye and spits at it; a wise and touching piece composed of five interlocking monologues that gradually reveal profound truths; and a moving and insightful drama that points hopefully and heroically toward a renewed faith in the principles on which our country was founded.

The playwrights are just as diverse a group: teachers, actors, directors, and writers who have all embraced the stage as the platform from which to share their unique voices and visions with the rest of us. These voices are as yet mostly unheard—in fact, two of the plays in this book are the very first ones written by their authors; at least half of these playwrights are still in their twenties. Read and enjoy their plays, and revel in their talent; if you're a producer or an artistic director or a drama professor, help spread the word about these extraordinary emerging playwrights by mounting one of their works at your local theatre or university. (You'll find contact information for each of them on page *iii*.) That's ultimately what this book is all about, to bring some much needed recognition to terrific work that might otherwise disappear unnoticed: the future of the American theatre—or a portion of it, at least—is right here in your hands.



I knew Matthew Freeman first as an actor, mostly from Gorilla Repertory Theatre's delightfully energetic outdoor summer productions of Shakespeare. In fact Gorilla Rep commissioned *The Death of King Arthur*, the verse drama by Freeman that opens our book; the company's artistic director Christopher Carter Sanderson is to be congratulated for entrusting this assignment to this young man who has done such a thoroughly terrific job with it.

The Death of King Arthur was written to be performed by a company of Shakespearean actors, and to be performed outdoors: it's big, ambitious, maybe even a little bit daunting. But what you'll discover, as you get caught up in this spectacularly well-crafted drama, is how accessible it is: Freeman makes this rollicking, outsized, familiar story entirely contemporary and entirely his own. He takes nothing for granted; he makes us look twice at what we think we know about famous characters like Arthur, Lancelot, Guenevere, Mordred, Morgan le Fay, and Merlin—and also at what we think we know about the nature of nobility, morality, and right and wrong:

AGRAVAINE: The grail is found, and what? More life. You see?
You like me plain, I'll tell you, I can be.
What's plain? Did you see God? Did I? Those men
Who want, by day, a little bit of bread...
Did they the Messiah touch on their cheek?
Do workers truly profit each to each

By wonders done in Distant Arab Lands?

The easiness of Freeman's verse reminds us how much life there still is in a form that doesn't get used much nowadays. And the genuine excitement that *The Death of King Arthur* generates, whether read or performed, begs the question of why this material hasn't been adapted in this way before. No matter; Freeman has done it for us now, and I wouldn't be surprised to find this fine epic romance of his becoming a staple of summer theatres across the country.



Marc Chun's *Match* began its life in the summer of 2001 in *Alternation*, a festival of one-act plays sponsored by Angelina Fiordellisi and Eduardo Machado's Cherry Lane Alternative. I didn't see it then, and I almost missed it again when it was subsequently produced by the Vital Theatre Company in their semi-annual new works festival *Vital Signs*. Embarrassingly, I arrived late at the theatre, too late to see the first three of five pieces on the evening's program. Luckily I was in time for Chun's remarkable play, one whose intelligence and very special resonance demanded that it be included in this volume, even though we were almost ready to go into production.

For *Match*, though it was written and premiered before September 11th, is the play in this volume that most directly addresses the issues that that catastrophe brought to the fore. It's a play about random events—some would call them chance; others, fate—and what they do to people whose lives are irrevocably changed by them. It's also about compromising, connecting, and figuring out finally what's important; it is, in other words, authentically about life and death.

Match is also a brilliantly conceived work. It's structured as five interlocking monologues delivered by five unidentified voices, and a good deal of its power derives from the fact that it takes us a while to understand who is talking to us and where they (we) are. We take a parallel journey with each of Chun's characters, from disorientation to something approaching understanding. It's an unforgettable ride.

It is, also, a beautiful one. Here's our introduction to one of the five protagonists of *Match*:

THREE: The sky was *that blue*. That's just what I call it: "that blue." I never came up with something more creative because, well, you only name things you fear you might forget. There were three other days when the sky was that *exact* shade. First, when I was five; my mom and I made a kite and then we went up to Wallacker Hill to fly it. That was the last time I... well, I stared up at that sky the entire day. Second, the day I found out I got into RISD, which is when I started to really believe I was actually an artist. And the third? The third was the day I met her.

Are you hooked? I know I was, sitting in the Vital Theatre, in time to encounter Marc Chun for the very first time, thanks to the self-same random chance that *Match* deals in.



Like *Match* and *The Death of King Arthur*, *Woman Killer* trades in the most fundamental issues facing humanity. What's on playwright Chiori Miyagawa's mind, though, is the very nature of good and evil: what makes a man, seemingly just like you or I, commit murder? Miyagawa took a bunraku play by Chikamatsu from 1721 as the source for *Woman Killer*, transplanting it to contemporary Brooklyn, where a young man, obsessively in love with a prostitute, sinks progressively deeper into a life of debauchery, crime, and amorality. The title gives the play's ending away; Miyagawa is concerned here not with story-telling but with using the theatrical experience to explore the elements of human character that make such a brutal story possible.

She does this by creating a universe that is at once familiar and starkly unpredictable. Characters whom we think we know—suburban housewives, doting parents, rebellious teenagers—suddenly pull away from us and say or do things we don't expect. Even the setting of the play—a cozy neighborhood in Brooklyn, just a short subway ride away from the theatre where *Woman Killer* premiered—may not be precisely what it seems:

CLAY: Are you going to move away from this neighborhood?

JAMES: It's not that far.

CLAY: Brooklyn Heights. That's nice. Nicer than this damn place.

JAMES: What're you talking about? This is the crossroads of Brooklyn: southeast to Nagasaki, northeast to Kyoto, southwest to Manhattan, northwest to the Temple Kanzeon. It's a great place. Just look at the Grand Army Plaza.

Miyagawa keeps us off-balance throughout *Woman Killer*; she never wants us to assume we “know” what's happening, either on the surface or in the increasingly disturbed mind of her riveting anti-hero Clay. Director Sonoko Kawahara underscored the disorientation by freely employing the techniques of eastern and western theatre throughout the play, reminding us that people everywhere in the world are neither as different nor as uncomplicated as we would like them to be.



J. Scott Reynolds's *The Wild Ass's Skin* is the third and last adaptation included in this volume. Reynolds is an intellectual and a bit of an iconoclast; he heads up his own theatre company, Handcart Ensemble, which produces spare, intelligent, and entirely uncompromising productions of work with significant moral content. Reynolds is also a director, and his staging of *The Wild Ass's Skin* was stunningly inventive, applying almost a story-theatre approach to material whose weight and complexity hardly invites treatment that light or loose. The resulting production gave actors and audiences the opportunity to become engaged, together, in discovering the secret of the ass's skin of the play's title, as together we breathlessly witnessed the protagonist's literal and ethical journeys to their exacting, bitter ends.

The Wild Ass's Skin is, then, at once cerebral and dramatically adventurous. It begins when a despairing young man named Valentine, about to commit suicide, happens upon a shop where he obtains a magical donkey's skin that supposedly can fulfill all of his heart's desires. There's a price, however: for every wish the skin grants its owner, a corresponding amount of the owner's life span is sacrificed.

Reynolds's play reveals the events that brought Valentine to his current state as well as what happens to him after he comes under the skin's spell. Written in verse, the play is intimate, lyrical, and astonishingly compact. Here Reynolds explores one of his central themes, condensing pages of the Balzac original to a few stunningly succinct lines:

SHOPKEEPER: Its pledge to axe the years from one's own life,
for me, too overweighs its offering.
And, caveat aside, I'd not consent
to have a thing so fickle as my wants
conduct a thing so cherished as my fate.
But as you only faintly prize your own,
I doubt that you'd forgo the season's bliss
this skin, how much exacting, would afford.



Ken Urban's plays exploded in small theatres around New York City and as far away as Seattle and Los Angeles in 2001; he's definitely a young playwright to keep an eye on. His play *Halo* premiered at the New York International Fringe Festival, demonstrating the breadth of his ambition and his talent. Urban describes *Halo* as a pageant, which is apt: the play encompasses three smaller plays, intertwined to create a startling panorama of life in Urban's home state of New Jersey at the very end of the twentieth century. Juxtaposing stories of a middle-aged woman, a pair of twenty-somethings who kill for thrills, and a modern-day Everyman (actually a successful businesswoman), Urban scores points about the empty, rudderless ship on which too many of us find ourselves stuck. He also provides vivid proof of the viability of his dark and somewhat eclectic vision of what theatre is supposed to accomplish. (Read the Afterword to *Halo* to learn more about that.)

Each of the three segments of *Halo* differ radically in terms of style and form. The Everyman section is aggressively post-modern. The story of Brandon and Sue has something of an MTV-punk feel and sensibility. The story of the middle-aged woman, whom we see at four different ages (in her 20s, 30s, 50s, and 60s), is lyrical and insightful:

6: How can you claim to see more than me, "From here," "From here," where are you? I'm the one at the end, I'm the one at the door of the great beyond, I'm the one who should be able to see
5: This belief, it simply isn't true
2: So the later years become the bitter years, do they?
6: My son now departed, a daughter never present to me, this is what the years have wrought?
2: In this world, you do what you have to.

5's line always knocks me out; Urban has the soul of a poet. *Halo* portends much fascinating work to come.



Shyness Is Nice is as blithely farcical as *Halo* is serious. This is an edgy, envelope-pushing comedy with an extraordinarily well-developed sense of the absurd; it's a post-everything sex-drugs-n-rock-n-roll farce; a sublimely hilarious cartoon laughing at and in the face of just about anything you can think of. Cartoon is particularly apt, I think, because despite all the major damage that occurs to the characters in *Shyness Is Nice* you always have the sense that—like Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck—they'll get up, dust themselves off, and dive right in to the next installment of their adventures.

The story, just to whet your appetite, concerns Stew and Rodney, best friends who, at thirty, are still virgins, stuck in some weird alternate universe of perpetual adolescence and music trivia. Their pal Fitzgerald hires a prostitute named Kylie to deflower them. But complications—lots of them—ensue when Fitzgerald tries to cheat Kylie's pimp out of the promised payment.

This is a very funny script:

STEW: So what did the dingoes do in lieu of... eating you?
BLIXA: Nothing.
KYLIE: They buried her.
STEW: God. Who found you?
KYLIE: Another pack of dingoes.
STEW: No!
KYLIE: They dug her up and brought her home.
STEW: Rejected by dingoes.
KYLIE: Rejected by dingoes.
RODNEY: That's the rough.
KYLIE: It was front-page news in Sydney.

The playwright responsible for this merry mayhem is named Marc Spitz, who, like practically all of his predecessors since Aristophanes, creates brilliant comic theatre by throwing the sacred and the profane on stage together and letting chaos theory do its number on them. The resulting nearly non-stop laughter may be the best kind of therapy there is for this terrible troubled world of ours.

Spitz, whose day job is Senior Contributing Writer for *Spin Magazine*, has been writing plays for just a few years, and he's already earned (deservedly) a rather rabid following among hip downtown New York types. It's time for the rest of the world to discover him.



I did not know, when I approached Curtiss I' Cook Sr. about putting his play *Reality* in this book, that his day job was playing Banzai the Hyena in the Broadway production of Disney's *The Lion King*. It wasn't that big a surprise, however, for the one thing that's certain about Cook is that he is a consummate man of the theatre. Cook is one of the hyphenated people, an actor-singer-dancer-director-producer-playwright. And his play reflects the questing sensibility of the Renaissance Man that he assuredly is.

Reality begins with a playwright, whose name is Curtiss, arguing with an unseen voice about the nature and purpose of theatre. Actors arrive on stage and Curtiss, like Seurat in Sondheim & Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George*, arranges and re-arranges them until he has them the way he wants them and the play proper can begin. That play starts out to be a comic mystery thriller set in an African-American church in Dayton, Ohio. But the only thing to be sure of in *Reality* is that you can't be sure of anything. What Cook has actually concocted here is a witty, provocative, deliciously challenging piece about the nature of life and art and creation. Actors burst through the fourth wall and in and out of character; scenes are restarted and replayed in hopes that this time things will go according to some sort of plan.

Reality is a veritable carnival of surprises, and it has depth, too: there certainly are no easy answers to be had here, though Cook does wrap things up with a devilishly clever—and satisfying—conclusion. He also creates vivid characters for his actors to play, and supplies them with rich and interesting lines to say, like this funny exchange involving a man, his wife, and an “other woman”:

LATHAN: Reverend, what do you expect us to do here?... We've been here for over eight hours, and I fail to see how this is benefiting anyone. I have to agree... This is a case for the authorities.
BERTHA: You're going to be a case for the authorities if you don't sit down... You shouldn't be saying nothing, other than who this Jezebel is with that tight cheap dress on.
CARMEN: Tight dress! First of all, sweetie, you don't know me well enough to be calling me out of my name! Secondly, I'm not the one you should be upset with! And as for cheap, I know you can recognize that—look at your weave!



On the opposite end of the theatrical spectrum is Kate Chell's wonderful drama *The Resurrectionist*, which is the most traditional two-act “well-made” play included in this anthology. It's here because its protagonist, Molly Lark, is a splendid character for young actresses to sink their teeth into: a fiery, spirited, smart, free-thinking, independent, wholly self-sufficient woman who doesn't need a man to define herself and doesn't look to society to provide boundaries to squeeze into. All of this makes Molly something of a novelty even today, but when I tell you that *The Resurrectionist* takes place in England in the 1600s, you begin to understand what a wonderfully unconventional heroine she is.

The Resurrectionist is also here because it's a ripping good story: this is a nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat suspense story, loaded with adventure, intrigue, and just the right amount of murder and mayhem. Even more impressive, *The Resurrectionist* has real moral weight in its story of a young woman who runs a

graverobbing business, supplying corpses for anatomists who are prevented by the law from obtaining bodies to study in more legitimate ways. The story of *The Resurrectionist* turns on the shrouded, horribly mutilated body of a young woman that Molly sells to an idealistic young doctor named Rymer. As the circumstances of this woman's murder gradually come to light, it becomes less and less clear whether the graverobbers or the doctors for whom they procure are the more culpable:

MOLLY: It couldn't go to waste, could it? A perfectly good corpse. What hideous kind of world is this? Where graves spit forth their bellies for us to sell like scraps to hungry doctors? We devour our dead and sacrifice the living.
ERIN: What do you expect? He deserved what he got. And don't get righteous with me, either. Smithfield's just a big market for selling dead meat. You live too long with the dead and maybe it ain't so good for you.

Chell delivers her unusual tale with economy, intelligence, and a generous helping of panache. Actors should be clamoring to play Molly and the friends and enemies who share the stage with her.



Bunny's Last Night in Limbo, by Peter S. Petralia, has a setting more exotic and rarefied even than *The Resurrectionist's* Restoration Era-London. Petralia's fantastical play takes place in a seductive dreamscape, where its protagonist (the Bunny of the title) tries to sort out the strange, mixed signals he is receiving from his parents, his sister, the world in general, and a mysterious boy in particular. *Bunny's Last Night in Limbo* is a very contemporary coming-of-age/coming out story; and also a reflection on the ravages of the suburban lifestyle. Most importantly, it points to intriguing new ways to explore topics like these in the theatre, using movement, songs, lights, and a virtually continuous soundscape to provide surreal comment on too-real problems.

Petralia assaults us on all fronts in this endlessly surprising play. Here's Bunny's sister, musing about makeup in an early scene:

SISTER:My mother thinks beauty is important. That's why she is so pretty. She lets me wear makeup because she wants me to be pretty, too. I'm glad 'cause being pretty is fun... and important.

And here are Bunny's parents, later in the play:

MOTHER: It's another day. Isn't it dear?
FATHER: I have been trying to tell you.
MOTHER: Are you feeling sick, sugar bear?
FATHER: Yes, I am feeling sick. I am feeling sick of this place.
MOTHER: Why don't we watch TV.
FATHER: I fucked Alice again today.
MOTHER: Oh.
FATHER: It wasn't as good as it was yesterday.
MOTHER: Should we watch the news again?

There's desperation here, behind the subversion; Petralia depicts this part of the contemporary psyche with remarkable sensitivity.

Petralia is a director as well as a playwright, and his staging of *Bunny's Last Night in Limbo* at HERE in New York City marked him as a true visionary. He is continuing to develop his unique approach to melding sounds and images with more conventional elements of stagecraft to reveal unstated truths about the culture that his theatre mines with such acuity.



Brian Thorstenson's *Summerland*, the final play in this collection, reflects our culture in a different way. It tells the story of Doreen and Bud, a mother and son who live in a remote town in South Dakota where she runs a diner and he just runs. Both are hungry for connection in a place where opportunities for it are almost unbearably sparse. Bud's loneliness is ameliorated by the fact that he is gay, though the only male companionship he's been able to muster thus far has been with a renegade trucker in a rest stop parking lot.

Enter Sam, another trucker, who is immediately taken with Doreen's pie and coffee and, quickly, with the lady herself; and Skye, an enigmatic drifter with whom Bud falls in love. Thorstenson gives his play the shape of traditional domestic drama as the parallel relationships rise and fall and intercept; he also puts in a welcome scene in which a drunken gay basher gets his come-uppance that makes *Summerland* something of a milestone in gay theatre.

What most distinguishes this beautiful play, though, is the presence of Aura, Doreen's dead grandmother whose spirit haunts—or maybe infuses is the better word—the protagonists and the piece itself. Aura's spirit is the spirit of America and of the pioneers who created it:

AURA: Couldn't have been more shocked when I first came to Dakota. Nothin but sky, endless endless sky and empty land. Couldn't see past that for a long time. . . . Then I started noticin how bright the moon and stars were. How the air sat on my lips like ripe fruit. How that desolation became this quiet, a quiet that worked its way into my bones. Became a craving. Became a balm. You hesitate before you give that up.

Thorstenson ends this lyrical play with the stunning image of Bud and Skye at the geographical center of the United States, about to embark to an unknown destination to make a life together. Aura looks down at the two of them as they kiss and says "Don't really know what to make of that. Seem content though. Seem, seemly." Here, just when we thought we'd lost it, is the true heart of America.



Brian Thorstenson, in *Summerland*, reminds us, with compassion and sincerity, who we are. So, in their own wonderfully divergent ways, do the rest of the playwrights whose work appears in this book. Their voices are resonant and original; their visions are clear-eyed and smart. Their moment is now: these are the plays and playwrights of 2002, or at least some of them. I hope you enjoy getting to know them as much as I did.