

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about ghosts.

Now, when we select the pieces to be included in a volume of *Plays and Playwrights*, the goal is to represent all of the currents of contemporary American drama—to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible in terms of genre, form, style, and so on. So when I look back, once the selections are made and the production work is finished, and find a common theme where I didn't expect one—indeed, where I purposefully tried to omit one!—well, that says something significant about what's on the minds of folks working in the world of indie theater.

So this year, it's ghosts and specters. A subconscious or unconscious looking backward and inward, trying to figure out what's keeping us up at night: the path we took that we shouldn't have taken; the bump in the road ahead that we need to swerve to avoid. This is what you'll find in *Plays and Playwrights 2008*.

There are plays here that confront the sickening decay that's rotting away at the American Dream—Leslie Bramm looks at hero worship in *Marvelous Shrine*, Robert Attenweiler at materialism in *..and we all wore leather pants*, and Thomas Bradshaw tackles insidious black-on-black racism in *Cleansed*. The impact of the current war in Iraq on the folks here at home is the starting point for Elena Hartwell's *In Our Name*, while the escalating dehumanizing effects of unchecked technological advancement underlie *Universal Robots* by Mac Rogers.

More personal specters from their own childish pasts haunt the main characters in Carolyn Raship's *Antarctica* and John Regis's *Linnea*, both of which are wise plays looking back on coming-of-age foolishness. And there are ghosts here of the most classical and traditional variety as well, i.e., the recently departed—they figure prominently in *The Telling Trilogy* by Crystal Skillman, *What Happened When* by Daniel Talbott, and *Fall Forward* by Daniel Reitz. The last of these is perhaps the most evocative and mature 9/11 play yet produced by an American author.

Behind all of these ghosts are ten remarkable playwrights who collectively represent what's best, freshest, and most vital in 21st century American drama. Don't let the spirits on these pages fool you: theatre writing is very much alive right now, and thriving. Whittling the many great scripts that graced NYC's indie stages during the 2006-07 season down to just ten was a supreme challenge (and that embarrassment of riches is one reason why this year we once again include an Appendix providing a comprehensive list of more than 700 new American plays produced in New York during the period covered by this book). It's a privilege to present these ten plays and playwrights to you.



Crystal Skillman was a photographer before she was a playwright, and a strong visual sense of composition, location, color, and light is evident in all of her work for theatre. You'll certainly notice it in *The Telling Trilogy*, which was written for Rising Phoenix Repertory over a period of a year and a half to be staged in specific areas of an East Village restaurant. (None was a traditional theatre space; indeed one of my most memorable theatre experiences was seeing the second part, *The Ride*, in a dim narrow hallway with seating for no more a dozen people—talk about a great way to experience a ghost story!) Though each of the component plays of *The*

Telling Trilogy stands on its own, we present them here as one entity and hope that directors and producers will want to mount all three parts of this play cycle as a single unified evening of theatre.

This a quirky, challenging piece, full of riddles and enigmatic twists and turns and disparate supernatural phenomena. Together, the three linked stories recounted here depict the deep and irredeemable loss that comes when we lose our bearings and our connectedness. There's a family at the root of *The Telling Trilogy* and it's their unraveling that threads through the piece. The first part, *The Reaching*, introduces us to two estranged sisters (the one who stayed and the one who came back, in Skillman's economical phrasing):

VIC: I don't exactly know how to ... I don't exactly know what to say to you.

TY: You can tell me why you're here.

VIC: Don't start that. Don't ask a whole lot of questions you know the answer to.

TY: Now that he's gone you're here. To take care of things.

VIC: He wanted me to sell it.

TY: You never asked me.

VIC: I don't need to—the decision's been made, alright.

TY: You made the decision to sell it.

VIC: It's the last night, I've got to make sure this place is cleared out tonight.

Skillman gets the cadences of loss achingly right here and throughout the trilogy, knowing just what to put in and just what to leave out as her characters try to articulate things they cannot understand. Hers is a singular and important voice, and it will be exciting to see where it takes her—and us—in the future.



The director and producer of *The Telling Trilogy* was Daniel Talbott, a founder and the artistic director of Rising Phoenix Repertory. Talbott is one of the most versatile and talented young artists working in the theatre today (witness the Caffè Cino fellowship that his young company received from the New York Innovative Theatre Awards this year), and he's represented as a playwright in this volume with his New York debut work, *What Happened When*. It was presented at HERE Arts Center in a finely realized production directed by Brian Roff and featuring the excellent young actors Jacob Fishel and Jimmy Davis.

This is a taut, spare one-act about two brothers who reunite for what we understand will be the very last time, to reminisce about their shared past and to try to heal some shared wounds so that both can move forward. I don't want to say too much more for fear of giving some important secrets away. The surprises at this play's climactic moments are breathtaking, and all the more so for being deliberately subject to more than one interpretation: this is a short but very full, very nourishing work.

Talbott's voice is distinctive, economical, and loaded with emotions that are specific, unstated, just below the surface, and ready to explode at any moment.

BROTHER 2: Dad hated snow.

Used to say his cousin was Cuban.

Used to cut out all those travel magazines.

Tape them to the bathroom

mirror.

Trees. Fish. Towels.

Fucking nets.

Shells.
(Beat.)
He wanted to take us to Hawaii.
Buy stupid fucking shirts.
Go whale watching.
Scuba diving.
Eat pig.

Talbott, in addition to working in indie theater as producer, director, and writer, makes his living as an actor (see his bio for some recent credits); his experience on the stage informs his writing invaluable. In *What Happened When*, he gives us two eminently playable roles that young actors are going to want to sink their teeth into for years to come. As playwright, actor, director, and producer, Talbott looks to be one of the bright lights of his generation of American theatre artists, and it's exciting to introduce his work to a broad audience here.



When I saw Carolyn Raship's *Die Like a Lady; or What Barbara Got* at the 2002 New York International Fringe Festival, I wrote "somehow it's harrowing and breezy and cynical and affecting all at the same time." That same kind of ambivalence and paradox infuses *Antarctica*, the next produced play by Raship and the next piece in this volume. It's a fantasia about two high school girls who set out on a journey to the South Pole (the true magnetic pole, mind you, not just Antarctica in general). One of them is the dreamy, obsessive, fitfully bossy, perpetually out-of-place and out-of-joint Magda; the other is the less complicated, more "normal" Winnie.

Raship introduces her singular yet archetypal characters with brilliant economy:

MAGDA: Meticulous records must be kept of all we see and do. On our return we will be fêted and toasted as Great Explorers. Posterity will be grateful for the knowledge bestowed to humanity by the first successful expedition to the true southern Pole by American Girls.
WINNIE: I saw polar bears at the zoo once. They looked really bored.
MAGDA: My life will be perfect.

They're the only two characters in this remarkable non-linear sort-of travelogue (unless you count the White Bear, a variation on Red Riding Hood's Wolf whom they encounter at the Pole and elsewhere; Raship smartly equivocates on exactly how he needs to be depicted in production, the better to engage the imaginations of future directors and actors of this piece as well as of the characters themselves.

Everything's finally up for grabs in this play. Do Magda and Winnie really go the Antarctica? Are they really best friends? By theatricalizing so effectively the turmoil of a young girl on the brink of womanhood, Raship accomplishes something very special—*Antarctica* is a contemporary fairy tale, or myth, wrought larger than life on stage.

Antarctica premiered, in a slightly different form, at the San Francisco Fringe Festival in 2005, and then bowed in the version included here at the 2007 New York International Fringe Festival. Anchoring both productions as Magda was Raship's frequent collaborator Maggie Cino, a very fine actor/creator whose work has been featured in this series already (her solo play *Ascending Bodily* was part of *Plays and Playwrights 2003*). Raship directed both productions, and her fluid staging was exemplary. She's provided terrific useful notes to guide newcomers into *Antarctica*'s unconventional world.



Thomas Bradshaw is just 27 years old, yet in a very short span of time he's become one of indie theater's most controversial figures. His first produced play, *Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist*, explores the seeming paradox of the country's foremost segregationist also being the apparently loving father of an illegitimate daughter (from a liaison with his black maid). His next piece, *Prophet*, deals with a white man named Alex who claims that God has commanded him to spread a gospel of enslavement of women. *Purity*, which followed, is centered around a very successful African American English professor at an Ivy League university who is working out issues of entitlement and self-hatred; it also features a notorious scene in which said professor and an associate gang rape a nine-year-old girl.

Is Bradshaw simply courting controversy in his career? I don't think so, and that's why his fourth produced play, *Cleansed*, is included in *Plays and Playwrights 2008*. The plot of this drama sounds like a media-grabbing sensational high-concept: a teenage girl in Indiana, daughter of a black man and a white woman, becomes a skinhead. It sounds like satire, but there's really nothing funny about *Cleansed*. Watch how quickly the playwright turns the tables on his characters (the father, Vernon, and the daughter, Lauraul) and his audience in the first scene:

LAURAU: My favorite color's blue!

VERNON: I thought your favorite color was yellow! Are you telling me a fib?

LAURAU: I changed my mind. It's blue now. I love you Daddy.

VERNON: I love you too. (*Kisses her on the forehead.*)

LAURAU: Daddy?

VERNON: Yes?

LAURAU: (*Cheerful.*) Are you a nigger?

It's clear that there's more going on here than a playwright simply trying to get our attention., what's going on here is a playwright desperately trying to make us *pay attention*, to problems that have been with us for decades and that, despite some improvements, refuse to go away. Putting issues like racism and sexism front-and-center inside his jolting, in-your-face plays, Bradshaw is only the newest practitioner of a healthy tradition of shaking up the masses with art that's rude and unpredictable.

Cleansed debuted, by the way, at the Brick Theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which has lately emerged as one of the go-to venues for interesting, cutting-edge theatre in New York. It was paired with *Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist*, on a bill mounted by director Jose Zayas. who is, like Bradshaw, an up-and-coming force in American theatre.



Playwright John Regis is one of the growing number of theatre artists who excel in many disciplines: besides writing plays, he frequently directs them (to wit, a fascinating production of Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II)'s *Job* in 2007) and acts in them; his day job is teaching drama and videomaking at a New York City school. He's also a co-founder of the Storm Theatre, and that's where I first got to know his work—I saw and greatly admired his one-act play *Stavrogin's Confession* back in 1998, before the *Plays and Playwrights* books even began.

Stavrogin was based on Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, which slightly foreshadows the Regis play in this volume. *Linnea* is inspired by *The Idiot*, with a love triangle at its center involving an earnest but naïve writer-in-training, an older and much more dangerous artist, and the beautiful and irresponsible exotic dancer with whom both men are in love. Regis has observed that if he'd written *Linnea* 15 years ago, when we was about the same age as the play's protagonist Danny, it

would have been a much different piece—more strident and effusive, perhaps. As it is, *Linnea* is wistful, melancholy, and gratifyingly mature: the reflections of a settled mind looking back on an untethering (but necessary) coming-of-age.

One of the neat things about this script is the way it plays fast and loose with naturalism. It constantly feels like it's going to tell its story realistically, but then we'll catch this absurd twist here or that surreal touch there, and we realize that we're really watching someone else's half-remembered dream. It's also very funny; here's one of Regis's most inspired creations, the Beggar King, introducing himself to Danny:

BEGGAR KING: My friend, you see
before you a truly broken man. A broken
down bit of Fifth Business. But, I was not
always as I am now. Oh no, dear friend,
no! *(Pulls an old headshot out of his cart.)* I
was an actor who could sing! *(Chuckles.)*
Once I played the great stages of the
world: the Lyceum, the Old Vic ... the
Burt Reynolds's Dinner Theatre! Why
was my head so big? BECAUSE IT WAS
CHOCK FULL OF DREAMS! But,
that was then, this is now ... Conspiracies
were hatched. Equity Warmongers
held my career at bay!
In fear and loathing, I gnashed my teeth,
and cried out: why? Why! WHY JERRY
ORBACH AND NOT ME!

Director Peter Dobbins brought just this magic quality to the premiere production at the Storm; it will be exciting to see how other artists capture *Linnea's* splendid ephemerality.



...and we all wore leather pants is set in a small town in Ohio in the '80s and concerns a dysfunctional American family in the midst of a meltdown. But lest you think this is a Sam Shepard retread, know that those other great Midwestern theatre poets, Williams and Inge, are equally antecedents to Attenweiler's singular style; and so are the South American magic realists and the mid-century European absurdist. His is a genuinely original voice.

...and we all wore leather pants introduces us to the Sturgess clan: the opportunistic patriarch Blanton; the elder son Jagger, who thinks he might be a car mechanic; the younger son Krank, who lives in a car up on cinder blocks in the driveway; and Jagger's sort-of nymphomaniacal wife Mary, who makes a habit of losing her children (as in, she can't find them). All of them are looking for something that's been eluding them all their lives, and when a mysterious stranger drops (literally) into their house during a storm that might be a cyclone or might be a meteor shower, all are convinced that he's their deliverer/redeemer.

But the plotting is less important here than the astonishing poetry that Attenweiler puts into his characters' mouths. The rhythms and cadences of the language constantly surprise, as do the (often biting) sentiments:

BLANTON: I am recently turned a serious religious man. Not in the way where I'm good to people or nothin', but I heard talk on the radio the other day 'splained Jesus in a way I finally get it. Said

he's comin' an' the time a comin' is soon so I figure I got to put a good face on my situation 'fore he comes and starts pickin' the wicked and the virtuous out of the flocks. Way I see it, I ain't the wicked and I ain't the virtuous—an' if I can keep a low profile when he comes 'round—nose clean and everything—I'm hopin' to fly total under his radar an' I'll wake up one day and won't be no one on this world but me and then I will have the life I always should have.

Attenweiler's work is produced by Disgraced Productions, for which he is artistic director; he's blessed with many simpatico collaborators in the company, including director John Patrick Hayden and actress Becky Benhayon, who created the role of Mary in the New York production of *leather pants*. Other actors and actresses will be clamoring to play these eccentric characters in the future, and I look forward to what Attenweiler comes up with next.



Leslie Bramm's *Marvelous Shrine* also takes place in the U.S. in the mid-1980s (in New Jersey), and gives us a more naturalistic look at a family in crisis. Marvelous is a 17-year-old boy whose passion is the heavy metal of Kurt Cobain and others. At the moment he's trying to figure out whether or not he's gay; his mother, would-be socialite Bobbie (an alcoholic), is urging him to come out, but his father Peter (a petty officer in the Coast Guard, separated from Bobbie) is determined to turn his son into a man.

The foregoing simply sets the stage and barely scratches the surface of the raw emotional drama that occupies *Marvelous Shrine*. Bramm explores here the nature of heroism and family pride and, not at all incidentally, the tragic effects of war. But at its core, the play is perhaps most concerned with the dynamic of the father-son relationship, from both angles:

PETER: Because I am the “nothing man”! Because my wife, in the midst of yet another Cosmo blur half sings and half says “Really Peter, you've done nothing you've ever wanted, nothing you've ever planned, you've turned yourself into a nothing man.” And she says it casually, matter of fact. Like a ticked-off list of things to do....Maybe for a lot of things in my life, it's already too late. But not for Junior. Not for my son.

Bramm has said that *Marvelous Shrine* owes its genesis to this question: If a young man dies in combat, “would the hero's medals, the letter from the President, the flags and ribbons fill the space left by a dead son?” He gives us some highly resonant food for thought in this play.

Bramm's frequent collaborator (and wife) Pamela Butler directed the original production at the 2007 New York International Fringe Festival, which was brilliantly acted by Jack Halpin as Peter, Sara Thigpen as Bobbie, and newcomer Paul Hufker as Marvelous. (Halpin and Thigpen have figured in previous *Plays and Playwrights* volumes: both were in the original cast of 2002's *Last Call* and Thigpen was also in 2006's *Burning the Old Man*.) Bramm himself has been an important fixture of the indie theater scene for more than decade, writing socially and politically conscious works like *Big Ball* and *Leo Oscar's Backyard* that, like *Marvelous Shrine*, hold a perhaps too-honest mirror up to contemporary American mores and values.



The war in Iraq is now in its fifth year, yet to date there has been shockingly shallow treatment of it in American drama. Elena Hartwell, a Seattle-based playwright who runs a company called Iron Pig, has provided perhaps the most direct and honest response to the war so far in her triptych of short one acts called *In Our Name*. Two of these three plays are monologues, while the third features just two characters. These are compact, intense, intelligent, timely, and

necessary works that look at the very real and personal effects of a war that still feels very “foreign” to many Americans.

I love the bravery and balance of these plays. *The Unraveling* is about a college professor whose daughter has returned from Iraq badly wounded. *The Things He Carried* depicts an expectant mother talking to her unborn child about her husband, who has been at war. And *Waiting for the Light* juxtaposes a Bush supporter with a Recordkeeper tracking the casualties of the current conflict.

None of these pieces is even remotely polemical: they’re all richly human and complex, as they consider aspects of a policy (or set of policies) that have taken us in directions that perhaps were never foreseen. Here, for example, is the wife in *The Things He Carried*:

WIFE: I was proud when he signed up for the National Guard. After seeing what that flood did to some of our neighbors ten years ago he wanted to be a man that helped. A man that stepped up when people were in need.

One weekend a month, two weeks a year, that seemed so ... manageable. He’s been in Iraq for seven months now. We certainly know when you were conceived, the night before he left. We weren’t really trying, we just weren’t trying not to. You’ll understand that difference some day.

Hartwell performed *In Our Name* with Iron Pig’s co-founder Rebecca Nachison at the 2007 New York International Fringe Festival, in a production notable for its simplicity and truth. (As we go to press, they’re getting ready to reprise their roles in an engagement in Seattle.) The three pieces that comprise this play are ripe for broader exposure, and offer strong, challenging roles for actresses hungry for smart, pertinent material.



Mac Rogers made his *Plays and Playwrights* debut in last year’s volume; he played the title role in James Comtois’s *The Adventures of Nervous-Boy*. Rogers is yet another of the indie theater scene’s great “hyphenates”: an actor-playwright-director-producer whose work, over the past five or six years, has become more and more well-known as both consistently entertaining and challenging. Rogers won the playwriting award at this year’s FringeNYC festival for *Hail, Satan*; just a month before that piece premiered, he knocked our socks off with *Universal Robots*, presented for just two short weeks at Manhattan Theatre Source in a production Rogers directed himself.

Universal Robots has two sets of antecedents. It is inspired by the play *R.U.R.* by Karel Capek, a cautionary fable about a company that creates “robots” (the term was coined by Capek’s brother, Josef) that eventually threaten the very continuation of life on earth. Yet it also owes much to the world of science fiction and alternative history, and while it is an intensely thought-provoking and even philosophical work, it is also an extremely well-made yarn, the kind that keeps you on the edge of your seat waiting to find out how it will all turn out.

Rogers takes considerable liberties with the facts of *R.U.R.*’s creation, to the point that Capek’s brother Josef is here reimagined as a sister, Josephine, whose fondness for a humble barkeep becomes one of the pivotal lynchpins of the story, thematically and dramaturgically. Real historical figures like Czech president Mazaryk are mixed with purely fictional creations like the singular eccentric Rossum, the brilliant but clearly off-balance inventor of the robots of the play’s title. And the grand pulpy tradition of sci-fi storytelling (will the robots take over the

world?) constantly gives way to unexpected social/moral conundrums, like the chilling one posed by this gentleman, writing a letter to Capek:

LETTER 6: I am a lonely man, possessed of an unspeakable desire, one that is very difficult for me to control. No remedy I have attempted has extinguished the desire, or even decreased it. But you can help me, Mr. Čapek. You can help me, and others like me. All I ask is a robot the size and shape of a child. A boy or a girl. Either will suffice. One of the newest models, with the skin and the hair that feels almost real. Since the robot will not be human, there can be no harm, and indeed much harm may be prevented. Please write back to me soon.



Plays and Playwrights 2008 ends, as it begins, with a piece from Rising Phoenix Repertory. *Fall Forward* by Daniel Reitz was written for Sidelines '07 in Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's River to River Festival; like *The Telling Trilogy*, it was written to be performed in a specific locale (and also like that play, will work beautifully in a traditional theatre space or elsewhere).

The site of the original *Fall Forward* was very particular: the John Street Methodist Church, which is the oldest Methodist Church in the United States and which is located about two blocks from the site of the World Trade Center. The play that Reitz has written for this place is a remarkable exploration of many of the questions that the catastrophe that was 9/11 was supposed to have drawn into sharp focus. His protagonist is a young stockbroker who, after spending half of his lunch hour in empty pursuits on his high-powered cell phone, encounters a stranger inside the church. Their conversation, and what follows it, touch at the core of what's fundamental in a life: love, honesty, self-fulfillment, and happiness. In the two earlier works that Reitz has written for Rising Phoenix (*Three Sisters* and *Rules of the Universe*), I saw this playwright's ingenuity, intelligence, and social conscience. In this remarkable play, we see revealed his great humanity and wisdom.

It starts, so gloriously mundanely, with the anonymous young man twiddling with his girlfriend over the phone:

MAN 1: No. Not Saturday. Because Saturday is dinner with my mom, I told you this. (*Beat.*) It isn't that you're excluded, you're just not invited. (*Pause.*) A. You don't like to eat. And B. She likes to cook. And she'll watch you not eat and it will annoy her.

And then Reitz pulls up short as the Man meets the older lady inside the church:

MAN 1: Broker. I'm a broker.

WOMAN 1: Do you enjoy it?

MAN 1: Sure. (*With more conviction.*) Yes. Absolutely. (*Looks at her.*) What do you do?

WOMAN 1: For sanity or money?

MAN 1: Uh ... money.

WOMAN 1: Ah, that's the easy one. I live off my dead husband.

Daniel Talbott directed the exquisite original production of *Fall Forward* at the Church, with a sterling cast (Joel Johnstone as the Man, Jan Leslie Harding as the Woman, and Julie Kline and Dean Imperial as the play's other two characters, who I leave for you to discover). It now awaits the interpretations of many many others; it's very much a play for our time and for all time.



Fall Forward, as one of the most moving and mature plays written about 9/11, has its ghosts, of course, bringing this essay full circle. The specters that occupy our imaginations and our hearts inspire us to all kinds of activities, and certainly the creation of art is one of the most important. I hope that *Plays and Playwrights 2008* inspires readers, actors, directors, playwrights, producers, designers, and audience members everywhere to go to the theatre, to make theatre, to support theatre, and very specifically to bring these ten plays and their ten authors to stages across the country and around the world. The goal of this volume, as with its eight predecessors, is to try to bring attention to some of the remarkable but not-quite-heralded talents in the indie theatre sector. Crystal Skillman, Daniel Talbott, Carolyn Raship, Thomas Bradshaw, John Regis, Robert Attenweiler, Leslie Bramm, Elena Hartwell, Mac Rogers, and Daniel Reitz give voice to some of the spirits that haunt humanity in these early years of the 21st century. I hope you enjoy listening to them!