

Language Makes Itself Come True

*Introduction to*

***John Jesurun – Deep Sleep, White Water, Black Maria – A Media Trilogy***

If you've once seen a John Jesurun play that's how you read them. Fast. A Jesurun fan likes adrenalin; attention to detail. Things have got to get done before things change.

Yet all time is potentially present. In *Chang in a Void Moon*, John's Monday-night serial play at New York's Pyramid Club in the 80s, characters from multiple time periods and places in history interact with, exchange with and affect each other. It is as if characters and plots from every movie he'd seen or book he'd read or anything that had made him curious, latently inhabited the same space. But the characters were new, distillations. His culture is hybrid – Jesuits, spies, car mechanics, characters who speak only Spanish, saboteurs, a chair that plays the Infanta, Germans playing French, Native American arrows, lines from pop songs used straight as if they are our language (and they are). And his/our culture IS the real. The character of Chang was played by two people, visual opposites in the same costume (John Hagan and Donna Hermann), sometimes simultaneously, and even argued; dead characters returned, for after all they remained characters in the space-time continuum that warped just as Chang was a vast universe of plots whose tentacles extended endlessly extended in any direction. The more episodes there were, the harder John's task of introduction became to tell the story so far.

But it was his sets that kept this sprawling baroque in line. Like camera angles in film noir, the audience would be presented with different views of the same situation – from the sides, from above, as performers scrambled during the briefest of blackouts to move the rectangle of foamcore that was the table. The props were gestures (like the icecubes that I held, as the blind king's blind daughter, that represented diamonds; but they were also icecubes, as the diamonds miraculously melted).

It's hard to read and imagine the technical setups in John's productions – they are conceived by a profoundly 4-dimensional theatrical imagination. John thinks the whole space. Projection is not a gimmick, it is place inside place, it is in dialogue with the characters, it is our life with screens, it is a layer in the spectrum on which also sit audience and live performer, it is prior and future and present existence simultaneously. Watching *Deep Sleep* was like being IN *Deep Sleep*. It is how we speak in forked tongues. Or it is simply a pool. Or a white rectangle.

Nobody moves much in John's work, or perhaps, like Steve Buscemi's constant circling on a rope in *Shatterhand Massacree* at St Mark's Church, they are caught in a movement. They don't have to move much. The words are the action.

And all could be achingly deadpan funny, and all could be moving or frightening, and all could be instantly deflated. And all are followed breathlessly, wait, didn't she just say...

The interrogation of *White Water* is familiar territory in his plays – see also the start of *Deep Sleep* and of *Black Maria*. People want to know something, demand, repeat demands. There are authorities, summits, religions, states, corporations – the stakes are high, sanity is fluid, the human risks itself, erupting through the oppression of control, and those who are in control tumble suddenly. Mack in *White Water* insists he telling the truth about the one thing they want to know – not really what happened but whether he is telling the truth – but the slipperiness of his other facts goes by unnoticed, like where his parents are – one moment dead, the next in Tibet. There is often this second register that is played at the highest points, or a third or fourth or more – the fact that the mention of Buchenwald is followed in *Number Minus One* by the words of a Beatles song make it no less important and neither less part of the fabric of the world – on the contrary, the lyrics take on new meaning.

John Jesurun's verbal images pile on each other, cancel each other, are gorgeously evocative, terrifyingly direct, disgustingly familiar, apocalyptic. In his language all is possible (yes, you CAN say that.) As in *Whitewater*, language makes itself come true. For me John is a great poet among modern playwrights. But, acting-wise, the language is never milked (anyway there isn't time). It abhors assumption, it has the best insults ever.

In much of his work, death is a major presence. In *Philoktetes*, as in *Black Maria*, and in *Number Minus One*, it is rubbed shoulders with, looked at in its ugliest, and smelled at its sweetest – in *Whitewater* the dead dog smells of flowers. The passage that migrated to open *Philoktetes*:

*Listen to me, I'm telling you something. So that you'll learn the value of suffering. The joy of sacrifice and patience, murder and manslaughter. So that you'll learn to speak the language of the dead. Once again it's time for you to shut up. Belly up to the buzzsaw. gravitational collapse, Blackleg, Yankee pot roast. Stop crying. You should be happy. Listen to me, I'm telling you something. You tell someone else and they'll tell someone else. This is what Philoktetes told me. This is his suicide note, his poison-pen letter. First, I'll give the clue, then the story, then the real story. First what they saw, then what was seen, then what was. The cadaver will direct the autopsy, a talking corpse narrating. A dead horse talking, a dead foot walking. Philoktetes is dead.*

may be the most breathtaking opening to any play I know. This was the 80s, when AIDS brought crashing a generation of imaginations, people we loved. And *Philoktetes* was performed again recently, now when our hands are dirty with the world's blood.

What's simple is complex and what's complex is simple.

Fiona Templeton  
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