

# Prickly Delights

Playwright Erin Courtney's violent nights.

BY TOM MURRIN

## Picks

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→ **The Hedda Lettuce Show** A weekly live talk, comedy and variety extravaganza hosted by the popular downtown drag personality. Taped for TV. **The Duplex, 61 Christopher St., 255-5438. July 4-25, Fri., 10 p.m. \$10.**

→ **No Strings Attached** A festival of 10 Richard Foreman plays, from 1968's *Angel Face* to '92's *Mind King*. Staged by nine directors. **Nada, 167 Ludlow St., 420-1466. July 7-Aug. 3, Mon.-Thurs., 8 & 10 p.m.; Fri., 8, 10 & midnight; Sat., 2, 4, 8, 10 & midnight; Sun., 2, 4, 8 & 10 p.m. \$12.**

→ **Incident at Cobbler's Knob** The new play by David (Naked)

Sedaris, cowritten with and starring his sister Amy, downtown's funniest comic actor, about city dwellers "escaping" to the country. **Lincoln Center Festival at LaGuardia High School Theater, 100 Amsterdam Ave., 721-6500. July 8-11,**

**Tues., 8:30 p.m.; Wed.-Fri., 8 p.m. \$32.**

→ **Summer Camp** The third annual festival of emerging playwrights, with a bonus of over 10 playwrights in *The 8 Minute Play Festival*. **Soho Rep, 46 Walker St., 334-0962. Refuge, July 9-Aug. 2, 7:30 p.m. \$10.**

→ **Full Time Funny**, semiautobiographical stories from Greg Walloch about "getting off, getting famous and getting it out in the open." **Dixon Place, 258 Bowery, 219-3088. July 10-26, Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m. \$10.**

→ **The Tempest** Modernized Shakespeare, wherein the shipwreck becomes an F train crash at Delancey Street, the desert island is a municipal parking lot and the clash between civilization and nature pits uptown rich vs. downtown artists. **Expanded Arts, 85 Ludlow St., 253-1813. July 11-Aug. 2, Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m. Free.**

**P**laywright Erin Courtney says she chose *Pricked* as the title of her latest theater piece "because it has both a sexual and an irritatingly violent feel." The verb's past tense is a good choice for this tasty, nasty, conflict-filled one-act wherein a broke young couple, who are at the end of their destructive relationship, move in with the woman's parents. "All the characters are like black holes," Courtney explains, "and the only way they can relate to each other is through physical sensation: sex, violence or goading each other into self-mutilation."

The talented 29-year-old, who has six short plays to her credit, says, "The writing always begins with a single image." For *Pricked*, she reveals, "It was an image from my prenatal existence—a woman with mummy hands." Generous with her ice-melting smile, Courtney cheerfully relates, "My mom was nine months pregnant with me, and even though she had three other children, she decided she had to do a crafts project. While stitching a giant felt 'Welcome Home, Baby' banner,

she pricked all of her fingers with the needle, and the dye from the cloth seeped in and gave her blood poisoning. At the hospital they lanced her fingers and bandaged up her hands, so they looked like big mummy hands. She had to drive herself home with these car-



Courtney's tainted love

toonlike, cloth-covered hands on the wheel." So needles, blood poisoning and bandaged hands are in the *Pricked* script, along with urine-filled Coke bottles and smoldering cigarette burns.

*Pricked* is Courtney's first attempt at naturalism; her background is absurdist. While at Brown University in 1988, she

wrote her first play, *Telephone or Bite Me*, in which a main character is a 10-foot papier-mâché phone. While getting her master's in fine arts at the San Francisco Art Institute in the early 90's, she wrote *Carcass Dreams*, about a female taxidermist who reluctantly gives birth to a daughter, whom she eventually stuffs.

Trained as an artist, Courtney has been riding two creative ponies since she moved here in '94. As part of the "Artists in the Marketplace" exhibition at the Bronx Museum this month, every Sunday she will take Polaroids of visitors and make charcoal drawings of them on the wall.

As a writer, Courtney feels accountable to her audience: "For the playwright, actors and director, our job is to make the experience as visceral, funny and engaging as possible," she says. "If people are coming out of their house, going across town and paying money to see your play, then you want it to be an exciting experience for them."

*Pricked* at **HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., 647-0202. July 17-19, Thurs.-Sat., 10:30 p.m. \$8.** \*

## Theater Trips

BY RICKY SPEARS

### GROSS INDECENCY—THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE

**U**sing actual trial testimony, letters and diaries, *Gross Indecency* presents a riveting evening of high courtroom drama as Wilde attempts to keep his ass out of prison while keeping his stylish opinions intact. Director/writer Moisés Kaufman has fashioned a chic play that will knock the argyle socks right off your feet. The superb cast, headed by the triumphant Michael Emerson as Wilde, makes for one of the handsomest shows I've ever seen. Theater is definitely alive and well downtown. **Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, 420-8000. Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 7 & 10 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m. \$20-\$45.**

### LONDON ASSURANCE

**W**hat is it about our overseas cousins that is so amusing? Could it be that they are so prim that we have to laugh hysterically at their every move? That's the case in this splendid production of Dion Bouicault's 1841 play. Brian Bedford (*The Molière Comedies*) proves once again that he is one of the motherland's greatest actors. As the foppish Sir Harcourt Courtly, he's pure gold. A weekend with this tart and his oh-so-proper friends will leave you in stitches. Helen Carey also deserves many accolades as Lady Gay Spanker. A brilliant piece of theater. **Roundabout Stage Right, 1530 Broadway, 869-8400. Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat. & Sun., 2 p.m. \$55.**

### THE YOUNG MAN FROM ATLANTA

**T**his tight play about a young man's suicide and his "roommate," who comes to make a kind of peace with his family, is at times harrowing and unforgettable. Though the "G" word is never mentioned, there's enough subtext in this short work to fill volumes. In the hands of the gifted actors Shirley Knight and Rip Torn as the dead man's parents, Horton Foote's story of parental dread, loss and longing enlightens the soul. This is high-quality, Pulitzer-winning stuff and shouldn't be missed. **Longacre Theatre, 220 W. 48th St., 239-6200. Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed.-Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. \$45.** \*

STAGE



# MAC ATTACK

CELEBRATING MAC WELLMAN, DEAN OF DOWNTOWN THEATER BY STEPHEN NUNNS



A man and his rant: Mac Wellman

OVER A GIANT VEGETARIAN burrito at a Soho restaurant, the bespectacled, soft-spoken playwright Mac Wellman recounts a recent rehearsal for one of his plays that was being staged at NADA. The playwright had shown up to offer support and, if asked, advice. When he asked the cast if there were any questions, one worried-looking actress timidly put up her hand. "I have a line that says, 'I'm of two minds,'" she said.

"Yeah?" replied Wellman.

"Well," she said, "I was just wondering. Does that mean I'm not sure about something, or do I actually have two brains?"

"You're on the fence," the playwright assured her.

"The thing is," laughs Wellman as he munches on his lunch, "it was a legitimate question."

INDEED. AFTER ALL, if you're an actor in one of Wellman's dense, often convoluted texts (which can be populated by vampires, plates and spoons that dance, fur balls, aliens, and things called bodacious flappedoodles), there's always the possibility that, yes, your character might actually have two brains.

While the 52-year-old John McDowell Wellman has been a staple of the Downtown scene for ages, this year theatergoers are being immersed in the World According to Mac. That's because "The Mac Wellman Festival," a six-month celebration of his work running through March, highlights more than 20 of his plays at theaters in four cities, including New York. The festival, brainchild of director Tim Farrell, has included readings of little-known works, restagings of "Mac Classics," a couple of world premieres, and panel discussions at New Dramatists and BAM.

The celebration kicked off in October with Soho Rep's premiere of the new musical *Fnu Lnu*. Since then, play after play has been thrown up in various venues around town, mostly at NADA and House of Candles. The festival encompasses everything from the lyrical verse plays like *Cellophane* that explore the American vernacular, to Wellman's rants against '80s right-wing politics (*Sincerity Forever*, *7 Blowjob*, and *The Self Be-*

*gotten*), to the wild linguistic gymnastics of his monologue *Terminal Hip* (which contains lines like "Jumbo pandas, their minds in motion/screen the cosmic ground ball, as one/cry up libation to the not wing...").

Wellman's presence has been felt recently in other ways as well. This year he also founded the Bat Theater Company with fellow Downtown theater stalwarts Eduardo Machado, Jim Simpson, Mike Nolan, Jan Leslie Harding, and Kyle Chepulis. The Bats even have their own space, the old Workhouse Theater on White Street, which is being renovated into a performance space-educational center. "I want to put Juilliard out of business," Wellman says modestly.

Add to this the fact that his plays are being produced all over the country—even in unlikely places like Cleveland (Wellman's hometown)—and it's obvious that Wellman has attracted a whole new generation of directors, playwrights, actors, and theatergoers. Indeed, a number of younger playwrights—Ruth Margaff and Eric Ehn, for example—look on him as a kind of mentor. "Young Downtown experimental theater artists who are working on readings of Mac's plays for the festival are suddenly realizing that they've been influenced by him," says Farrell, the festival's director.

Clearly, Wellman has arrived. Not bad for a writer who—despite numerous Obies and Bessies, not to mention the occasional Guggenheim or Rockefeller award—has been the personification of "fringe." How does all this sudden "respect" mesh with someone who is known as being one of the bad boys of experimental post-Joycean, "Jabberwocky"-style writing? And what does a "commemoration" like the festival signal? Most playwrights aren't honored this way until they're dead. Or mainstream.

IS WELLMAN HEADED that way? Hardly. "We're caught in a culture that has no reverence for the world or anything in it," Wellman says. He has a bit of a smirk on him face. "Ideals mean nothing, and most people have their heart in one place and their pocketbook in another. In former times, your social enemies at least dressed a certain way so you knew what they looked like. Now you can't tell them apart."

Ah, this is the Mac Wellman we expect to hear: His self-effacing, vaguely professorial demeanor notwithstanding, the guy is on a rant. And the fact is, in this cynical, we-don't-want-to-take-a-stand-'cause-we're-too-cool-and-jaded decade, it's refreshing—albeit old-fashioned—to hear someone like Wellman vent.

It's that sort of passion, and the anger behind it, that has been the motivating force for much of Wellman's work, particularly the plays from the late '80s and early '90s. (He dedicated *Sincerity Forever*—a wild and woolly ride into the darkest heart of America—to Jesse Helms and American Family Association head honcho Donald Wildmon, and engaged in a hilarious and nasty letter-writing campaign to both men. The correspondence was eventually included in the published version of the play.) And though Wellman brushes off the idea of ire being his muse, or that he's a political playwright, you only need to ask him about the state of American culture to get a rise out of him.

"There was this amazing sellout that happened in this country in the '70s and '80s which I could see coming pretty clearly," he fumes while ordering a cappuccino. "And no one cared to stop it. Then there was the amazing self-destruction of the left through a profound lack of historical realism, an impatience, a kind of dandyism—a refusal to see things in the long term. Republicans take the long view. The left was too busy being foolish and moralistic and self-absorbed."

When asked about the state of the American theater—experimental or otherwise—Wellman is equally cynical. "The kind of work I do deals with certain issues that are impossible to get to through the traditional dramatic form. What really is there? Realizing that the tissue of lies that we live in is false. What is the meaning of being alive? How do we feel about it? What is drama? Now I suppose those things can be discussed in a traditional play structure—I guess it's possible. But obviously, I'm not that interested in that." [continued on page 44]



# Character Contrast

*Terminal Hip* and  
*The Self-Begotten*

By Mac Wellmann  
House of Cornices  
99 Stanton Street  
278-6200

BY MARIO ROBINSON

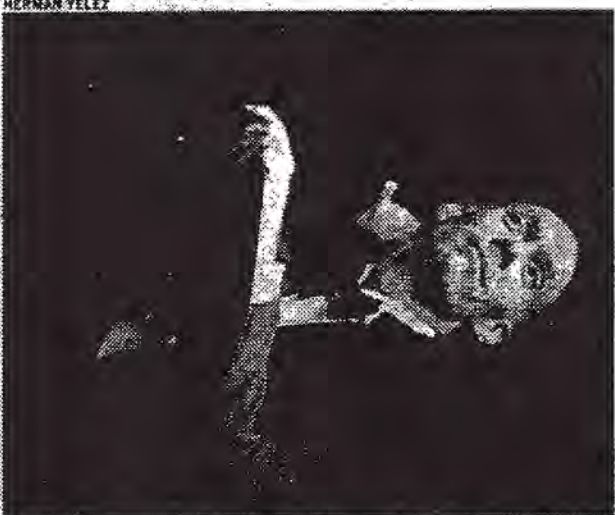
**A** *Terminal Hip* may be taken aback at first by the sight and sound of John Wellmann. (Not to mention by his new actor's name: the echo of the playwright's own is weirdly appropriate for the work of someone fascinated by doubles.)

Mellor delivered Mac Wellmann's epic monologue about moral corruption like a man possessed, trying to regain his identity by talking more furiously than the demons that he alone hears. We heard him both speaking and being spoken through. Wellmann, by contrast, is the untroubled master of his language, making ever more baroque constructions as his pleasure in speaking grows. In the places where Mellor was deliberately stiff, Wellmann's languid. Where Mellor seemed pedantic and suspicious, Wellmann is whimsical and flirtatious. Mellor's bulky glasses and sack suit confirmed his character's squareness. Wellmann is thin, dressed in a tuxedo—the very model of an extra man. Mellor sweated a lot and shook, as if he were about to explode. Wellmann lounges in a chair,

throwing his head back and raising an eyebrow. Mellor's character was a demagogue; Wellmann's is a diva—an interpretation that puts *Terminal Hip* in a line of performance that includes Lanford Wilson's *The Madness of Lady Bright*, Irene Fornes's *Dr. Khan*, and Ron Vawter's *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*.

A strange place to find Mac Wellmann; stranger still that it seems so natural. Tim Farrell's production obeys such a fluid rhythm that we trust it to carry us through the difficult language and deposit us safely on the shores of meaning. In this case, meaning is emotional. The text sustains its speaker's romanticism, fuels his rage, and in the end opens on his deeper anguish with a studeness and clarity that will shock those expecting only the satire announced in the title.

The actor's stylishness serves, rather than prettifies, his character's ordeal. In such lines as "Go and think up mutability... even if the topic abhors thee," and in whole passages that



John Wellmann in *Terminal Hip*

sound like elegies in his neat, poised readings, he hears, and helps us hear, the playwright's controlled lyricism. The play's more rambunctious sections, peppered with such slogans as "Bite the hand that feeds!" and "Bark up the wrong tree!" here have a polish that reflects the speaker's self-consciousness as much as his joy, as if at the height of his ecstasy he suddenly doubts whether anyone is listening. When the character redoubles his ef-

forts to dazzle us, we can guess at the price he's paid. It's not just the extremely shallow stage, cold light, and pockmarked cement wall behind him that suggest a horrible solitary confinement. In those passages where campiness flares into catiness, or merely sounds hollow, the actor acknowledges a futility and loneliness that even the playwright's most soaring speech is unable to conceal.

**TERMINAL HIP** shares the bill with a 1982 Wellman monologue, *The Self-Begotten*, given an equally clean staging by Farrell. The play is minor—a boorish senator on a Mideast junket self-destructs in the face of his own soullessness—but set alongside *Terminal Hip* it has new resonance. The senator (in a confident performance by Dan Sturges) embodies everything *Terminal Hip* attacks—hypocrisy, cowardice, egotism. He, too, is addicted to speech, capable of talking himself toward painful truths which he could ignore if only someone would interrupt him. The more he talks, the more he fears the sound of his own voice: what will it make him hear next? The greater his hope for a reply, the deeper his humiliation at the silence. ■