

Making Words Music

Q-and-A with Eric Overmyer

BY GERARD RAYMOND

The moment Eric Overmyer discovered *The Heliotrope Bouquet*, a piano rag written by the legendary ragtime artists Scott Joplin and Louis Chauvin in 1906, he was hooked. Inspired by the exquisite music and the story of its creation, he wrote the play, *The Heliotrope Bouquet by Scott Joplin and Louis Chauvin*. It premiered at Baltimore's Centre Stage two years ago, and is currently at Playwrights Horizons.

How do you depict the creation of a work of art? Overmyer brilliantly meets this challenge by translating ragtime music into words. In a key scene in the play, the two actors playing Joplin and Chauvin speak and move in a manner which emulates the syncopated rhythms of a piano rag. The music is heard both on tape and is played live on stage by a musician, but the audience also experiences it through Overmyer's writing.

Those familiar with Overmyer's previous work will not be surprised at the virtuosity of *Heliotrope Bouquet*. We expect unabashed theatricality, verbal pyrotechnics, and unbridled imagination from this playwright. In his best known play, *On the Verge, Or the Geography of Yearning*, three Victorian lady travelers trek through time and space collecting curious artifacts of American culture from the first 50 Years of the twentieth century. *In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe* is a dazzling interweaving of themes, both varied and interrelated, ranging from anti-Asian prejudice, Aryan Nation bigotries, and paranoid conspiracy theories to ghostwriting, and the proliferation of chain letters.

Heliotrope Bouquet is set in 1917, the year Scott Joplin died. As he nears the end of his life, the great "Entertainer," as he was once called, is racked by the crippling symptoms of tertiary syphilis, and has been all but forgotten as a musical genius.



Duane Boutte as Louis Chauvin and Delroy Lindo as Scott Joplin in a scene from Eric Overmyer's *Heliotrope Bouquet* at Playwrights Horizons. Martha Swope

It took over half a century for his music to be rediscovered and his status as a great American composer to be acknowledged. The events of the play, including the historical collaboration with Louis Chauvin, are presented through Joplin's feverish dreams. Joplin is tormented by his memories of Chauvin, who died much earlier, having succumbed to multiple sclerosis at the age of 26. Chauvin may well have been the greater artist, but his reputation now rests solely on his single published work, the piece of music he co-wrote with Joplin.

Shortly before the New York premiere of *The Heliotrope Bouquet by Scott Joplin and Louis Chauvin*, Overmyer and I talked about the play and his work.

TheaterWeek: What drew you to *The Heliotrope Bouquet*?

Eric Overmyer: The music is very beautiful. It is always after the fact that you decide what the play is about. I think it became about making art, how an artist lives

and what survives and what doesn't. It is a very personal piece, although it may not seem so on the surface. It is autobiographical as all of my other plays are—disguised, but very personal deep down underneath.

The play itself feels like a piano rag.

I think in some way the play echoes the music. There is a lot of repetition and variation, like a rag. It's all in one movement, like a piece of music. We tried it with an intermission and it seemed like a harsh interruption. It works much better without.

How did you look for a way to make the words suggest the music?

I didn't do it in any systematic or mathematical way. I did it intuitively. I am not a musician. I just steeped myself in the music and listened to that particular piece over and over again till it evoked something in me, till I got some imagery. And then I followed wherever that took me. So there was no analysis. I guess it is like someone who can play the piano but doesn't read music. As a playwright, I think I am

musical. I think of my plays as scores really and I work the language very hard.

Did you ever consider getting the actors to play the music on stage?

We quickly discovered there were no piano-playing actors. Actors could painfully pick out the melody but the music is very difficult and it takes an accomplished pianist. And the musicians can't act. Two different hemispheres of the brain involved, I guess. We never found anybody that could put all this together. Although, ironically, the actor playing Chauvin (Dunane Boutté) is quite an accomplished pianist and can actually play *The Heliotrope Bouquet*. But Joe [Morton, the director] doesn't let him do it. In any case, it was always my intention to find a verbal analogue to the rag kind of music.

How much research did you do?

Very little. I did my usual research, which was minimal, and then I never went back to check it. When Joe came in, he noticed that I had set the play nine months after Joplin actually died. I thanked him for that and changed it. So there are inaccuracies. The essential facts, such as they are in the play, are accurate, but I take liberties, it is not a docudrama. . . .

But the play is not meant to be a portrait of the man's life, in that sense.

No not at all. It is really a meditation about this piece of music and its making. Somebody else can do the Scott Joplin biography.

All your plays are influenced by an obsession with language. Is this why you started writing?

I think so, yes. I don't have an explanation for the palpable thrill I get from seeing a word on a page, and the passion I have for it. I don't know where that comes from.

If all your characters are loquacious, isn't there a danger they might all sound similar?

I don't know that they all do. In *On the Verge* they are similar, and there is historical evidence to back that up. It seems to me that each play demands its own language. I think my newest plays are simpler in their language and plainer, but not naturalistic. You know what I find odd? In this country there is a tradition of intelligent playwrights writing characters that are less intelligent than they are—their idea of what proletarians are, blue collar workers who aren't very bright. It drives me crazy! It is very condescending and in-

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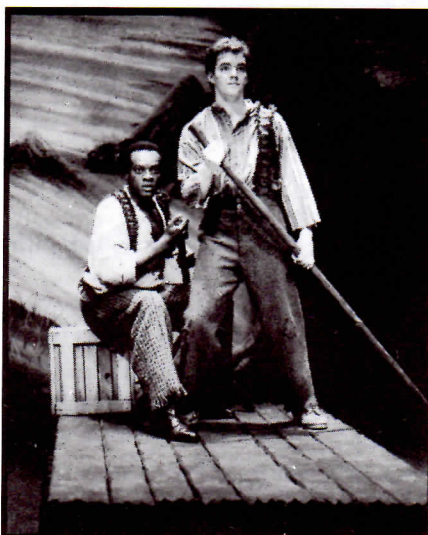
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accurate. This is a long tradition of naturalism that goes back to Inge and people like that. Intelligent characters are more interesting, just like intelligent people are more interesting, and there is nothing elitist about that. It's not about class, they can come from any walk of life.

Are only certain kinds of actors able to play your verbally agile characters?

Yeah. I think it is like writing a piece of music that is difficult to play. You need a player with a certain amount of technique, a certain amount of chops. But the best actors are intelligent and they are masters of their technique. You have to play on the language and not in between. American actors are very prone to playing between the lines—

To concentrate on finding the feeling.

—yes, and finding the subtext, instead of playing on the language. It's not that they are unable to do it; they have a lot of habits that are not helpful when doing certain kinds of text. I think my plays insist on an attention to language, and if they don't get that from the text, then I'll remind them that I am not fond of improvisations or interpolations. If I take out articles and conjunctions, that's because I mean to do that, and they need to pay attention to that.

You sound very protective about your text.

Yes, because it's notes, it's music, and it makes a difference. Actors are very used to mushing the language up. I understand that because they do a lot of TV and film work where the words are not very well written and they need to make them a little more natural.

It seems to me that the theater is a place where language is paramount, and that is what makes it interesting. I have always been mystified by naturalism in the theater. Why should one sit through an evening of uninteresting language in the theater without any of the compensations of film and television? I don't understand why it survives and what its popularity is. It's like watching live television.

But you also have a successful television career. How do you stand it?

Oh, my other life! Well, it is so different. I have seen a lot of playwrights trying to do TV or film and they don't adapt themselves enough. They hang onto their style and it doesn't really work. My theatrical style of working is too verbose to work in front of the camera. Actually it would have worked in the '40s. If I had been around when Preston Sturges was around... I

have been watching those movies. Those scenes go on forever and people talk and talk and talk. It's just playwriting. But I actually like writing in the other style. It's a change. I like having to think in that condensed way and I don't mind it.

How did you get involved with television?

I owe my TV career to Tom Fontana [producer/writer of *St. Elsewhere*]. He asked me to do a few scripts and then he gave me a job on that show. Really, it changed my life. Since then I have worked on *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*. Recently, I have been doing a number of pilots and hopefully I will be doing more.

Haven't you reached a stage in your career where you could just be a playwright?

Well, I got my royalties statement for last year from Broadway Play Publishing. It was almost entirely from *On the Verge* and the amount was \$6,000. That was my income from playwriting last year!

How come you never took to writing novels? It would seem the natural medi-

“We used to get stoned and go to the Safeway and look at all the products. American culture is... a supermarket full of bizarre stuff.”

um for somebody as fascinated with words as you are.

A question I ask myself every day of rehearsals! It's really daunting, the idea of writing a novel. I would like to do it, but haven't worked up the nerve. I can't imagine how people do it. Dialogue is the easy part, it's that other stuff, all that prose, it's massive. I just read *Libra* by Don de Lillo. It's a fabulous book and I thought, “This is really hard!”

With a novel you would have more control of your text.

That is why novels are so attractive, because the words stay the same on the page. The collaborative aspect of the theater is double-edged; it's both the satisfactory part and the frustrating part. It is exactly the part that makes playwrights want to be novelists. When Don de Lillo did a reading of a play that he wrote here at Playwrights Horizons, he was intrigued by the conviviality and the sociability of the

theatrical experience. He said it was very seductive. But he has gone back to writing novels.

What about the cinema? Has anybody wanted to film any of your plays?

I have never had a glimmer of interest. I think particularly because the language is so specific, and they are all about language to some degree. I think my new play, *Dark Rapture*, probably has a film in it, but not the others. It is flattering that they are so theatrical and no one wants to film them, but on the other hand I could use the money.

What is *Dark Rapture*?

It's about theater noir. I was trying to do in a play what Elmore Leonard does in his novels. It's funny, but it is dark and serious. I was in a dark mood when I wrote it. It will be done at the Public Theater next year.

Are you working on anything else at the moment?

I'm working on a version of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which is due to be produced this Summer by ACT in Seattle. I am setting it in the Pacific Northwest in the 1950s. Instead of trolls in the forest you have Big Foot. There is a kind of frontier thing—American tall-tales, a story-telling, fabulist tradition—which fits very nicely. Then I am doing my TV stuff. I am also stewing about with a new play but I don't know what it is yet.

To get back to *Heliotrope Bouquet*—Did you worry about people questioning the ability of a white playwright to capture Black speech and rhythms and a specific African-American experience?

I have been cognizant of that question hovering since I started the play. My feeling about writing is that you can't write about anybody else unless you have empathy and imagination. And if you do have empathy and imagination, then you should be able to write about anyone.

I approached *Heliotrope* with a great deal of care, with great respect for the music, and I wanted to get it right. I think I have a good ear for people's speech. I try to listen and not presume, so that I can hear. I'm gratified by the response to *Heliotrope* all the way along, and although the question has come up from time to time, I seem to have successfully gotten the play.

As George C. Wolfe said, we are all mulatto in this country. No matter what their ethnicity on the surface is, everyone is inextricably linked in this country, cul-

turally. American culture isn't about a bunch of white people sitting around talking about their problems in somebody's living room. One can't imagine American language without black speech. To be an American playwright, I think you have to deal with that diversity, not to be politically correct but simply to deal with the reality. I try not to presume to know more than I do know, and do it with respect and empathy. Does that make sense?

I guess one might say all your plays reflect a great interest in the various facets of American culture.

Yes, and I think my way into that has been through language. I think American language is so astonishingly rich because it is diverse. It keeps being fed by new cultures that come and join whatever this is—this semi-party, semi-riot—that is America, and it is constantly renewing itself.

I have always been fascinated with how rich and how surreal American culture is in its day-to-day reality. To take it apart and look at it is, I think, a way to cope with it, the insane aspects of it as well. In the old days, we used to get stoned and go to the Safeway and look at all the products. With that kind of perception it was amazing, it seemed intensely amusing. This place was full of all this weird shit! You could spend hours there until it wore off. American culture is a little like that—a supermarket full of bizarre stuff.

You have a way drawing together several varied themes in your plays.

I start with something and then it becomes like a ball of twine—it just gets bigger and bigger. It becomes a bundle of images, meanings, and subjects that seem to be interrelated.


You don't think it's bad to throw in too many subjects into a single play?

No, I like that. Single topic plays are movies of the week—social problem of the week, disease of the week. Anything that is worth looking at more than once has to have more resonance than that, I think. It should have a certain amount of bottomlessness, a certain amount of unplumbable depth that remains a little bit out of reach, a bit mysterious.

Still, *Heliotrope Bouquet* is a bit different in that respect, isn't it?

This one is simple. It is not so dense as some of the other plays. I think it is the closest to a dramatic poem that I have done.

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