

THE EPOCH TIMES

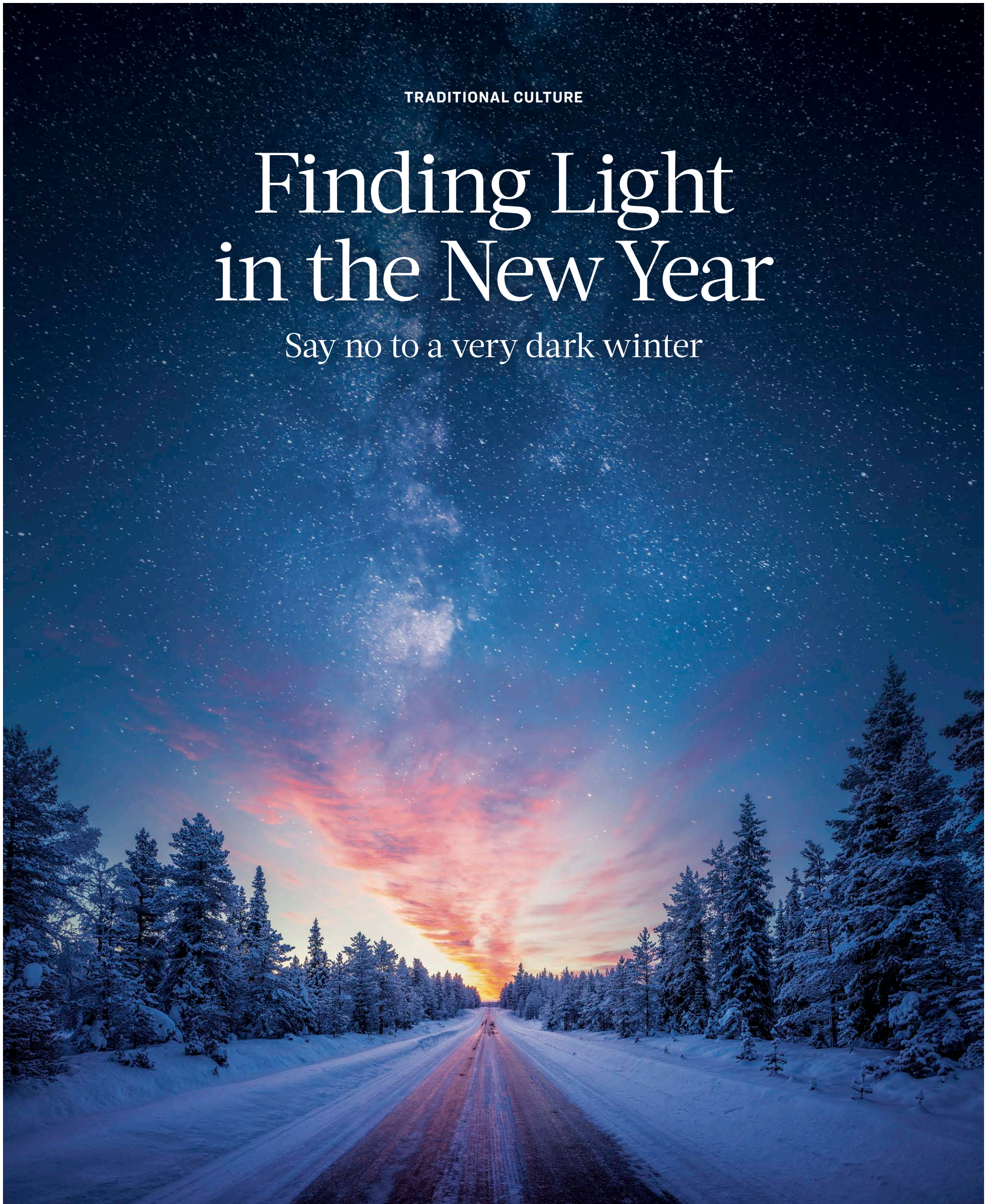
ARTS & CULTURE

JARMO PIIRONEN/SHUTTERSTOCK

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Finding Light in the New Year

Say no to a very dark winter



Let's look for the light this winter instead of the darkness.

JEFF MINICK

Here I am writing about the new year two weeks in advance of the holiday, and as is the case with everyone else, each day brings a barrage of news about the pandemic, the presidential elections, and all sorts of other crazy stories ranging from Hunter Biden's laptop to robots delivering food in Moscow.

Usually for an article such as this one, the writer will review the past year, highlighting its main events and personalities. I doubt whether my Epoch Times readers need or want a rehash of such an ugly year. Later, we'll look at what we can take away from these troubled months.

One New Year's tradition will remain unaffected by the virus, and it deserves a special place of honor in this year of turmoil and fear.

Nor am I willing, as some do at this time of the year, to make prognostications about future events except to say buckle up, because 2021 will likely bring even greater challenges.

Besides, there's my "ability" to peer into an orbiculum—that's a fancy name for a crystal ball—to discern the future. More than 50 years ago, my roommate at Staunton Military Academy returned from Christmas break and played an album by some group called The Beatles. "Aww, they'll never make it," I said after listening for a few minutes. "Stick to the Beach Boys."

Which is why I've never invested in the stock market.

So what do I want to write about here?

It's pretty simple, really.

New Year's and us.

A Bit of History

Several ancient peoples, among them the Babylonians, Egyptians, Chinese, and Romans, celebrated a new year. Evan Andrews, in his "5 Ancient New Year's Celebrations" (History.com), for example, writes of Chinese New Year that during this 3,000-year-old holiday, "festivities traditionally last 15 days. ... People clean their houses to rid them of bad luck, ... [and] gather with relatives for a feast. ... Each year is associated with one of 12 zodiacal animals: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig."

Continued on Page 4



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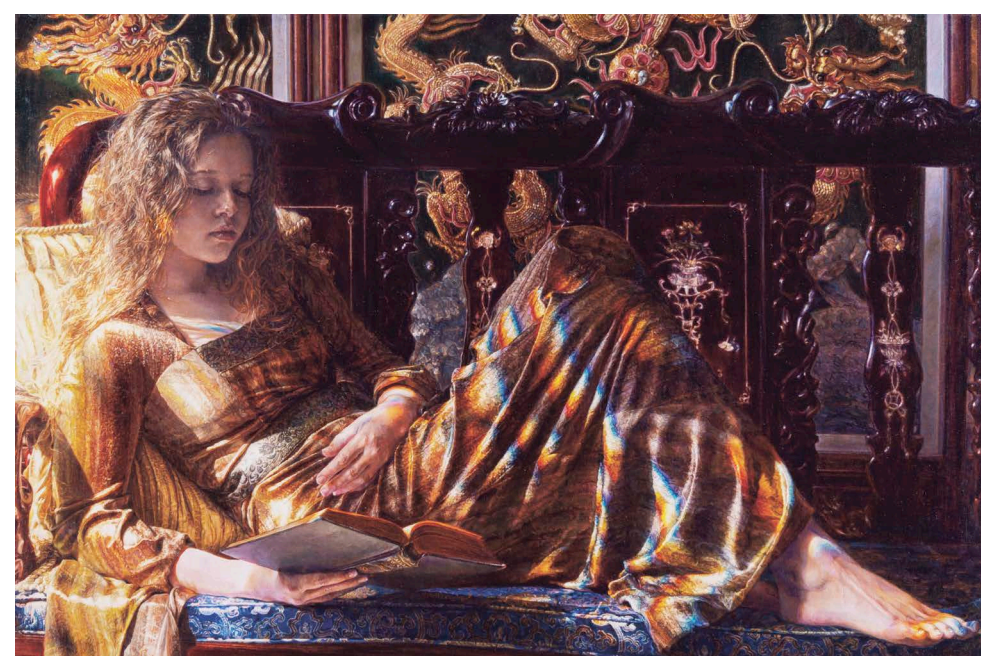
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LITERATURE

An English Gentleman's Wisdom 'On the Art of Writing' and More

LORRAINE FERRIER

Last year, while thumbing through books in my local thrift shop, I stumbled upon an intriguing book called "On the Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. It's a simple paperback published in 1946. (The book was first published in 1916.)

The book is a series of lectures that Quiller-Couch presented to students at Cambridge University between 1913 and 1914, when he was the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature.

It is one in a series of 20 Guild Books published in 1946 by The British Publishers Guild, as stated on the book's back cover. The Guild comprised 26 of the UK's leading publishers who, for the Guild Book series, chose outstanding books for the public to purchase at a low price.

Published just after the war when printers were short-staffed and paper rationing was still in force, the book felt ever the more precious to me.

I was looking forward to discovering what treasures my Quiller-Couch thrift-shop find would reveal. Often, when I research an art article, I'll look at old books from the 18th and 19th centuries to understand a subject. For me, the almost romantic language in those books seems to hold a certain reverence for the arts, and they are untainted by Marxist doctrines that are too often found hidden in art literature from the 1960s on.

A Gentleman's Love of Great Literature
"Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch of Fowey who as author, critic, and anthologist kindled in others a lively and discriminating love of English literature," states Quiller-Couch's memorial in Truro Cathedral, Cornwall, in Southwest England.

Quiller-Couch's lectures in the book "On the Art of Writing" certainly evoke that sentiment. He lectures on the lineage of English literature, the importance of verse and prose, and the literary greats from the Greeks to Milton, and more. Greek, Latin, and English literary quotes in his lectures all extol English literature's tradition.

What I found were not only gems for great writing but, as with all great literature, I also found some guidelines for good living. This makes sense when you read Quiller-Couch's description of great literature:

"They are great because they are alive, and traffic not with cold celestial certainties, but with men's hopes, aspirations, doubts, loves, hates, breakings of the heart; the glory and vanity of human endeavour, the transience of beauty, the capricious uncertain lease on which you and I hold life, the dark coast to which we inevitably steer; all that amuses or vexes, all that gladdens, saddens, maddens us men and women on this brief and mutable trajet which yet must be home for a while."

Great literature seems to be the lifeblood of humanity. Here are some of the life lessons from Quiller-Couch's lectures.

To Grow, Honor Your Ancestral Peers
"Antiquam exquirite matrem." Seek back to the ancient mother; always it has recreated itself, has kept itself pure and strong,

by harking back to bathe in those native—yes, native—Mediterranean springs."

Quiller-Couch believed that all literature, whether consciously or not, harked back to the original great artists, the ancient Greeks and Romans. And that literature could only grow by honoring the past masters: "I think for example, that if we studied to write verse that could really be sung, or if we were more studious to write prose that could be read aloud with pleasure to the ear, we should be opening the pores to the ancient sap; since the roots are always the roots, and we can only reinvigorate our growth through them."

Great Art Breeds New Great Art

To illustrate why his students needed to study great artists, Quiller-Couch quotes the Royal Academy of Art president, Sir Joshua Reynolds. "The more extensive, therefore, your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled, the more extensive will be your powers of invention."

Our creativity is sparked when we study and familiarize ourselves with the best of any given field. The three best texts for teaching English literature, according to Quiller-Couch, are the Bible (Cambridge's authorized version), and those of Homer and Shakespeare. He says that Homer stands above them all.

Understand Your Purpose

"For while the ways of art are hard at the best, they will break you if you go unsustained by belief in what you are trying to do," Quiller-Couch said.

This applies to all our endeavors. Although wandering around may be exciting at first, it's hard to continue on any journey if you're unaware of your destination. If you don't know where you are heading to and why, you'll soon lose faith.

Practice Discernment

In the book, Quiller-Couch invites his students to question everything they read, and he invites them to learn only what fits into certain rigorous criteria. "We should lay our minds open to what he wishes to tell, and if what he has to tell be noble and high and beautiful, we should surrender and let soak our minds in it."

In one of his last lectures he reiterates this point, but on a different matter, to question his teachings: "Do not presume me to be right on this. Rather, if you will, presume me to be wrong until the evidence is laid out for your judgement."

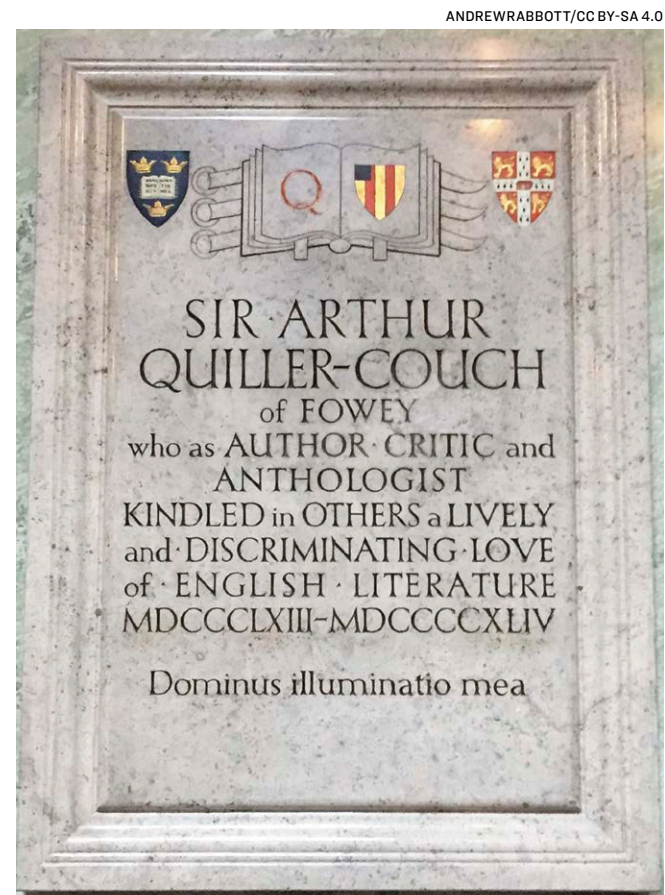
Quiller-Couch valued this commonsense approach—over any certification or award of knowledge—crediting it with shaping a man whose judgment could be trusted.

Edit Yourself

Contemplation is key. If you want to accurately convey your thought "upon the wax of other men's minds," Quiller-Couch suggests to his writing students: "You must first be your own reader, chiseling out the thought definitely for yourself."

He also said in an earlier lecture: "The more clearly you write the more clearly you will understand yourself."

When you are convinced, your communication will naturally be convincing. This



“
If what he has to tell be noble and high and beautiful, we should surrender and let soak our minds in it.”

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, writer

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's memorial in Truro Cathedral, England.



Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (1863–1944), circa 1910. English man of letters, professor of English literature at Cambridge University from 1912, edited the "Oxford Book of English Verse" 1900; "Oxford Book of Ballads" 1910; "Oxford Book of English Prose" 1925; wrote stories of Cornwall and of the sea including "Lady Good for Nothing" 1910; "Q's Mystery Stories" 1937; and criticism "The Poet as Citizen" 1934.

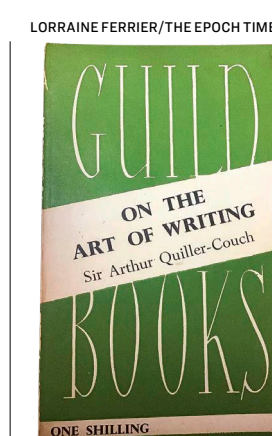
applies not just to writing but also when speaking, and even to our thoughts.

Value Honest Over Embellished Communication

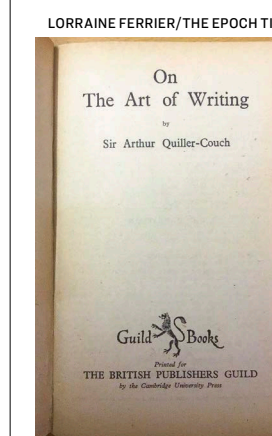
Effective communication, in writing or speech, is succinct and conveyed in ear-

nest. As Quiller-Couch says: "In literature as in life he makes himself felt who not only calls a spade a spade but has the pluck to double spades and re-double."

He also emphasizes the connection between a man's character and the way he communicates. "If your language be jargon,



My fortuitous thrift-shop find: A pre-loved paperback of "On the Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.



"On the Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch was one of only 20 Guild Books published in 1946, as outstanding literature, after the war.

your intellect, if not your whole character, will almost certainly correspond," he said. Simply put: "We are what we eat" could easily extend to "We are what we speak."

Quiller-Couch explains that the best practice in writing is to use the "active verb and the concrete noun." He cites Shakespeare as an exemplar: "I wager you that no writer of English so constantly chooses the concrete word, in phrase after phrase forcing you to touch and see."

If, in any of your communication you see extra ornamentation, here's Quiller-Couch's famous writing advice: "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings."

Write Nobly
When Quiller-Couch lectured on Feb. 12, 1913, Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his team were courageously conquering the South Pole. A newswire on the day of the lecture announced Captain Lawrence Edward Grace "Titus" Oates's death.

"From the records found in the tent where the bodies were discovered it appeared that Captain Oates's feet and hands were badly frost-bitten, and although he struggled on heroically, his comrades knew on March 16 that his end was approaching. He had borne intense suffering for weeks without complaint, and he did not give up hope until the very end.

"He was a brave soul. He slept through the night hoping not to wake; but he awoke in the morning.

"It was blowing a blizzard. Oates said: 'I am just going outside, and I may be some time.' He went out into the blizzard, and we have not seen him since.

"We knew that Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman."

The news acted as a solemn reminder.

When a writer commits someone's story to paper, there's a real responsibility to honor both the subject and the reader.

Quiller-Couch said: "Gentlemen, let us keep our language noble: for we still have heroes to commemorate!"

To read "On the Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, visit Gutenberg.org

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New Year's has long been a time for reflection and renewal. "New Year's Eve," circa 1876, by Charles Henry Granger.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Finding Light in the New Year

Say no to a very dark winter



Circa 1900, Baby New Year flies above the globe, wishing holiday greetings on a New Year's postcard.

Continued from Page 1

Perhaps appropriately, 2020 was the Chinese year of the rat.

Modern Traditions

We associate New Year's Eve with celebrations. Old Man Time departs, and a baby serves as representative of the new year.

We frequently mark this change in the calendar with parties, champagne, fireworks—brought to us by the Chinese—and various other traditions. Many prepare special meals to welcome the new year. Here in the South, for example, some families still eat black-eyed peas (I'm not a fan) and collard greens on New Year's Day for good luck.

In the past, crowds have gathered in Times Square to watch the "ball drop" on New Year's Eve, but this January 1, for the first time in 114 years, that event will be virtual because of the pandemic. Hopefully, the traditional New Year's kiss at midnight will still be delivered in person, and those who gather together will sing "Auld Lang Syne."

But though the pandemic may cancel some of our parties and shared meals, one New Year's tradition will remain unaffected by the virus, and it deserves a special place of honor in this year of turmoil and fear.

The New Year's Resolution

The ancient Babylonians, the Romans, and the early Christians are just some of the people who, when the new year rolled around, resolved to lead better lives.

Millions of Americans do the same. In "10 Top New Year's Resolutions for Success and Happiness in 2020," Peter Economy tells us that about 60 percent of us will make a New Year's resolution, though only about 8 percent will actually stick to that vow. Economy used the artificial intelligence of "Polly" to come up with a list of probable 2021 resolutions. Most of these vows are familiar: work out at the gym, get into shape, lose weight, and upgrade our technology. Others include becoming a better person, staying

motivated, and trying something new.

In the list above, we notice no specific measures, only generalities. Even when we resolve to lose weight, unless we set up a program of tactics and deadlines, odds are that come December, we'll still be carrying those extra pounds we'd hoped to shed.

Though I've made numerous New Year's resolutions, I only recollect keeping two of them. The first was four years ago, when I resolved to read Will and Ariel Durant's massive 11-volume "The Story of Civilization." I spent half an hour or so nearly every day with the Durants, and finished the last volume in early December.

This past New Year's, I undertook to write letters to two of my grandkids every week and take some treats to the employees of my favorite coffee shop and the public library once a month. These vows I have kept as well.

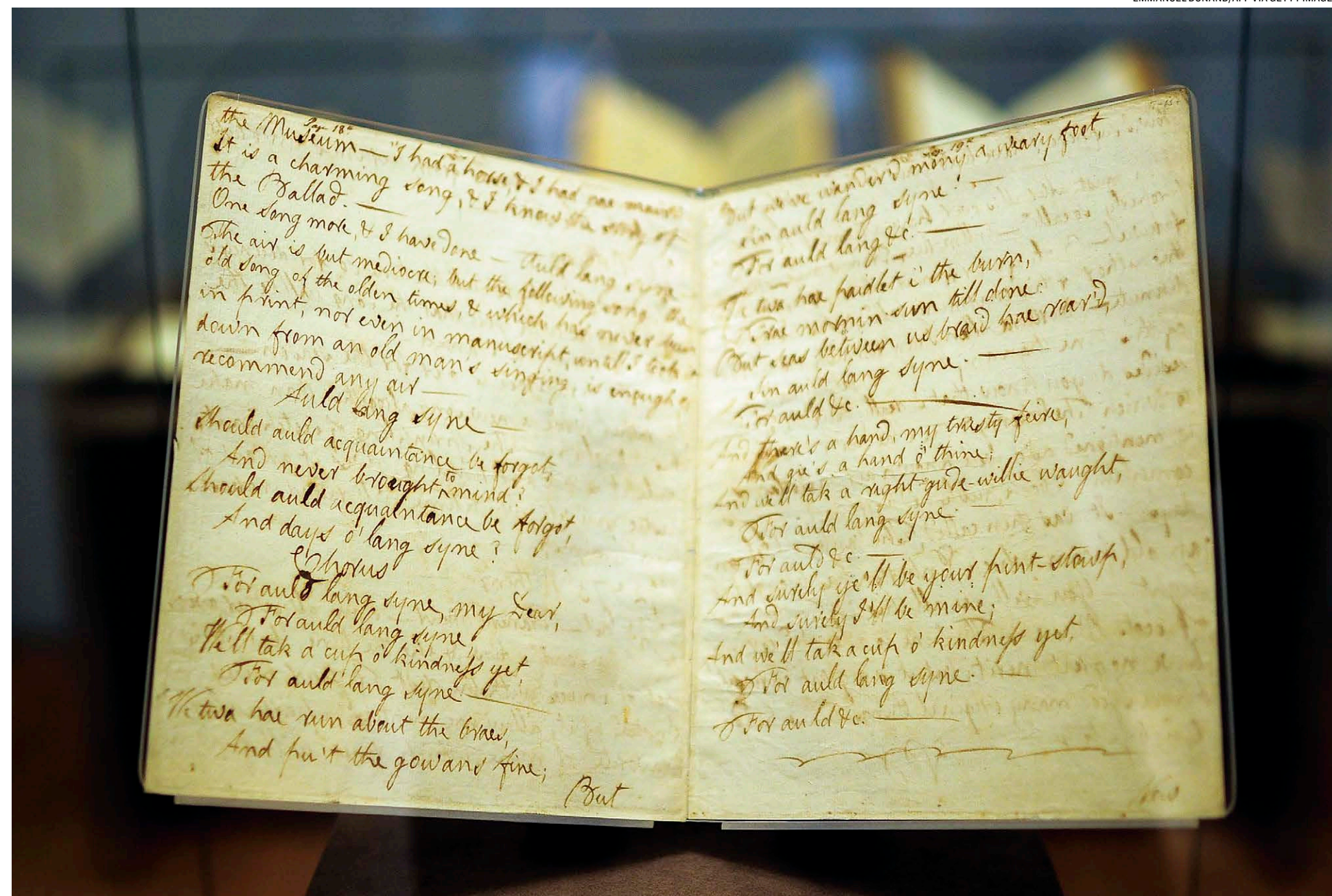
Both resolutions were very specific in nature and intent, with a schedule attached to them. Had I simply resolved, "Be nice to the people at the coffee shop," nothing would have come from such a broad promise.

So in addition to losing weight or working out, let's think of some New Year's resolutions to help us keep our culture and our traditions alive and well.

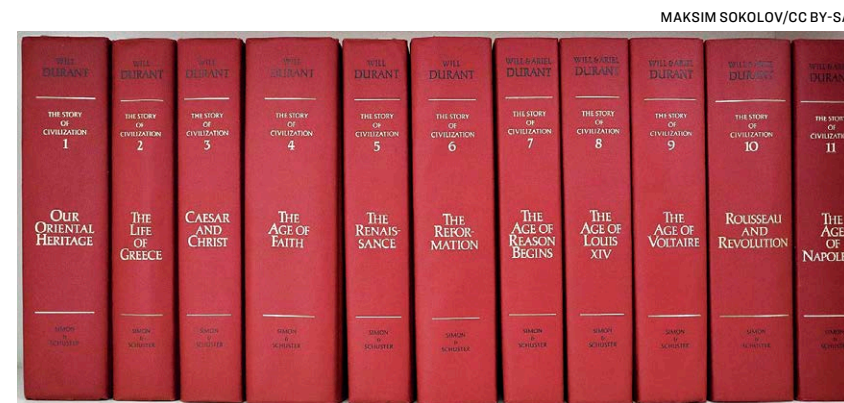
Resolutions for Cultural Revival

We could gather our friends, neighbors, and family members together once a month or even once a week for an American songfest. We can easily find online the lyrics for "God Bless America," "America," and scores of other pieces celebrating our nation. These get-togethers would build camaraderie, help us recollect who we are, and bring some joy into our world.

We can read old books. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, try to read an old book after you read a new one. Just as importantly, we can introduce young readers to American classics like "Tom Sawyer," "The Little House" series, and "To Kill a Mockingbird," which was just banned in a California school system. Take the gang to the library or find



The lyrics we all sing at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. The original letter featuring the lyrics of "Auld Lang Syne" by Scottish poet Robert Burns at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York on Dec. 9, 2011.



Set yourself a concrete goal such as reading the 11-volume set of Will and Ariel Durant's "The Story of Civilization."

Let's think of some New Year's resolutions to help us keep our culture and our traditions alive and well.



older books at sites like bartleby.com. For a real literary shot of patriotism, read Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country."

We can learn more about some art that is unfamiliar to us, deepening our appreciation for the works of Mozart, the paintings of El Greco, or the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. We might set aside even just a small part of the day to listen to Bach's

Let's introduce young readers to some American classics. "Tom Sawyer Fishing," the frontispiece of the first edition (1876) of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" by Mark Twain. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



Time to revive an old tradition: family singing. Circa 1955, American television show host Ralph Edwards and his family sing songs around a piano in their home.

"Brandenburg Concertos," or turn the pages of a book on art from the library, or read a chapter from George Eliot's "Middlemarch."

Such excursions not only lift us out of our present but also bring us into the palace of the true and the beautiful.

'For Auld Lang Syne'

Traditionally, we sing these words—"they mean "for the sake of old times"—on New Year's Eve.

As we ring in 2021, we should keep "the old times" of the past year in mind. Almost all of us have suffered the bruises and abrasions delivered by 2020. Many have lost their jobs and businesses, and some lost loved ones to the virus. Most of us would agree, I suspect, that our nation has undergone a battering unlike any we have seen in our lifetimes.

To quote an old American folk song, most of us hope "Oh, hard times, come again no more."

Unfortunately, hard times are likely to come again in this new year, but here's the good news: Our months of suffering have prepared us for them. This time we won't be taken by surprise.

In addition, our trials have also brought us some treasures, if we have the eyes to see them and the memory to recollect them.

The Gifts of 2020

During this time of pandemic, masks, and "safe distancing," many of us have grown closer to family, friends, and neighbors.

When a lockdown keeps us from a Thanksgiving dinner or a New Year's party, we realize more than ever how precious others are to us. Those of us who live alone are especially cognizant of the importance of relationships.

The old year has toughened us, readied us to confront the trials ahead—warriors ready to fight. I've never particularly cared for the aphorism "What does not kill us makes us stronger," but for America's sake I'm hoping it is true.

Let's take what we have learned and move forward with stout hearts to meet our new challenges.

Happy New Year to all!

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See Jeff Minick.com to follow his blog.



(Left) Larry Yando has been a fixture as Scrooge at the Goodman for more than a decade. (Right) "It's a Wonderful Life" of 2018 with (L-R) Ian Paul Custer, Brandon Dahlquist, and John Mohrlein.



ONLINE-THEATER REVIEW

A Virtual Christmas, Chicago Style

BETTY MOHR

Since the debut of Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" at the Goodman Theatre in 1978, "Bah Humbug!" has been Ebenezer Scrooge's cry of rebellion against holiday cheer. That expression of antipathy against festive joy has been the hallmark of Scrooge's misanthropy for more than four decades at that distinguished Chicago theater. But never was the exclamation "Bah Humbug!" more fitting than it is this year.

Indeed, 2020 has been a year of sickness, deprivation, and heartache, which is why we need a little cheer, some comfort, and a large dose of optimism more than ever before, and which we hope to find in two streaming events. The duo presentations are being offered to audiences looking for something that can inspire them, lift their spirits, and offer them a way to connect with family and friends—if only through a virtual event.

The two most long-lasting productions that have become standard holiday fare in Chicago are the Goodman Theatre's production of "A Christmas Carol" and the American Blues Theater's theatrical adaptation of the Frank Capra film "It's a Wonderful Life." While Dickens's tale, first published in 1843, was an immediate success, the 1946 Capra movie received poor reviews and was not an immediate box-office hit. It didn't become a beloved Christmas classic until 1976, when it was first released on television.

'A Christmas Carol'

In its attempt to bring a measure of holiday warmth to the season, the Goodman Theatre is providing its annual presentation of "A Christmas Carol" for Chicago audiences in a free audio-streaming version.

Although the previous productions of the show featured music, dance, and terrific special effects, the audio play, of necessity, leaves out the magical wizardry to focus on the meaning of the holiday. It is still faithful to the uplifting Dickens story in which Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his business partner Jacob Marley and then the spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

The ghosts take Scrooge on a spectacular adventure in which the elderly miser comes to realize that there is nothing humbug about kindness, compassion, and helping one's fellow man.

Furthermore, the streaming production stars Larry Yando, who has played Scrooge for 13 seasons. While a variety of actors have played the part of Scrooge over four decades, Yando's has become the most popular portrayal. That's because he delivers a compelling insight into Scrooge's lonely and unhappy childhood and his aspiration for money to avoid poverty.

Instead of a one-dimensional caricature, Yando portrays Scrooge as a man transformed, a man who regrets the loss of his youth and who develops a deep emotional connection with his humanity.

Voiced by an all-Chicago cast of 19, the drama has been re-created especially

'A Christmas Carol'

An Audio Play by Goodman Theatre
GoodmanTheatre.org
Free Dec. 1–Dec. 31

for audio consumption—and not just for those in Chicago! It started Dec. 1 at 7 p.m. and will be available for free, streaming at GoodmanTheatre.org/Carol and on demand through Dec. 31.

'It's a Wonderful Life'

While the Goodman's "A Christmas Carol" has become the longest-running show of the holiday season in Chicago, the runner-up is American Blues Theater's "It's a Wonderful Life Live in Chicago!"

True to the Capra film, it centers on George Bailey whose attempted suicide is stopped by Clarence, his guardian angel. Then, through Clarence's intervention, George learns how different the lives of everyone in Bedford Falls would have been if he had not been born.

The American Blues ensemble has treated Chicago audiences to a live 1940s radio broadcast for 18 years, and the virtual production will re-create the town of Bedford Falls with sound effects and an original score of holiday carols. The virtual production is being presented live from the actors' homes, complete with individual sets, costumes, and sound effects.

Directed by Gwendolyn Whiteside with music direction by Michael Mahler, the cast includes Brandon Dahlquist as George Bailey, John Mohrlein as Clarence/Mr. Potter, and Audrey Billings as Mary Bailey.

As an arts writer and movie/theater/opera critic, Betty Mohr has been published in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Australian*, *The Dramatist*, *The SouthtownStar*, *The Post Tribune*, *The Herald News*, *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto, and other publications.

'It's a Wonderful Life Live in Chicago!'

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ONLINE-THEATER REVIEW

Streaming 'Peter Pan, A Musical Adventure'

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's delightful hit

BETTY MOHR

"Peter Pan" first took center stage in a London theater two days after Christmas in 1904. In advance of its opening, word got out that the play by Scottish author J.M. Barrie (1860–1937) was about a boy who didn't want to grow up, who could fly, and who had adventures in a place called Neverland. The gossip was that the unusual play would be a bust, so everyone was surprised when it turned out to be a big hit.

It wasn't just a huge success in its own time, though; Peter has never grown old. Indeed, he seems to be flying forever having been immortalized in Disney's animated movie (1953) and the film "Finding Neverland" (2004) starring Johnny Depp; in Broadway musicals, such as the production starring Mary Martin (1954), and revivals with Sandy Duncan (1979) and gymnast Cathy Rigby (1990). In modern culture, it became the name of a psychological syndrome, and even a moniker for a major peanut butter brand.

Since Peter Pan has become such an icon, it's understandable that the Chicago Shakespeare Theater—which has a penchant not just for mounting Shakespeare's work but also for children's classics—would have found it irresistible to produce

"Peter Pan, A Musical Adventure." Indeed, the Chicago theater company presented the show in 2018, which was so well-received by critics and garnered such box office receipts that the company is offering the musical again in a free, streaming version available to all at ChicagoShakes.com from Dec. 19 through Jan. 1, 2021.

A New Version

"Peter Pan, A Musical Adventure" is a new version of Barrie's story by Elliot Davis based on a book by Willis Hall, with a musical score by George Stiles and lyrics by Anthony Drewe. Directed and choreographed by Amber Mak, this captivating production brings out all the qualities of "Peter Pan" that have made it popular through the ages. But the show is not just for kids; it's for adults as well.

That's not to say that there isn't a lot of magic in the production. Patrons will marvel at the lush Victorian-era nursery setting by Jeff Kmiec, thrill at Mike Tutaj's projections of a London church steeple, a green-leafed island, and a pirate ship, and be fascinated by the flying effects of the ZFX Flying Effects. Indeed the imagination of the production re-creates a breathtaking fantasy world.



Peter Pan (Johnny Shea, top) leads the Darling siblings, (L-R) Carter Graf, Elizabeth Stenholt, and Cameron Goode, on a high-flying adventure to Neverland in "Peter Pan, A Musical Adventure," streaming free on-demand for the holiday season.

'Peter Pan, A Musical Adventure'

Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Chicago
Information
312-595-5600 or
ChicagoShakes.com
Running Time
1 hour, 20 minutes
Closes
Jan. 1, 2021

Furthermore, it is unlike previous stagings in which Peter was portrayed by female performers. This time, Peter is played by a young male actor, which gives a greater authenticity to the work. And the actor playing Peter, Johnny Shea, with an impish grin and athletic prowess, is amazing. When he flies through the window of the Darling nursery, it's jaw-dropping exhilarating.

Other performers who contribute to the enchantment of the show

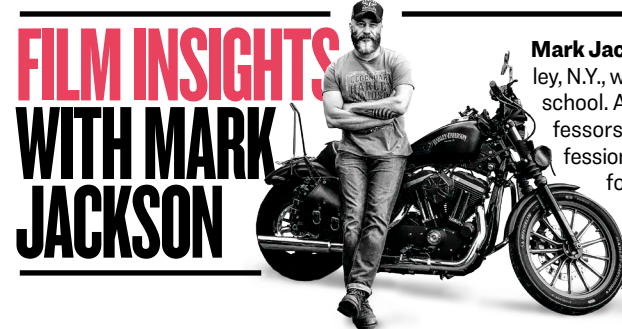
include James Konicek, who plays Mr. Darling and Captain Hook, and who almost goes overboard in his hilarious depiction of the scoundrel pirate who lost his hand to a crocodile. When he sings "When I Kill Peter Pan," he demonstrates how good being bad can be.

Elizabeth Stenholt does a fine job portraying a nurturing Wendy, who mothers Peter and his Lost Boys (Colin Lawrence, Christina Hall, Travis Austin Wright, Michael Kurovski, Jonathan Butler-Duplessis, and John Marshall Jr.).

Cameron Goode and Carter Graf as her younger brothers, John and Michael, deliver nice turns. Rengin Altay offers a poignant finale as the grown-up Wendy, and then there is the Darling family's huge nursemaid dog, Nana. Played by Butler-Duplessis, in costume designer Theresa Ham's shaggy dog costume, he steals the show.

Last but not least, there is Tinker Bell, the fairy created by Greg Hofmann's lighting effects. When Peter asks the audience to bring Tinker Bell back to life by clapping, theatergoers in the 2018 production that I saw applauded wildly. Surely, viewers watching the streamline repeat of the show will do the same.

As an arts writer and movie/theater/opera critic, Betty Mohr has been published in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Australian*, *The Dramatist*, *The SouthtownStar*, *The Post Tribune*, *The Herald News*, *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto, and other publications.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Reminder of Massive Coverups

MARK JACKSON

"Spotlight" and "Erin Brockovich" are both true stories, respectively, of 1) journalists investigating rampant pedophile priest corruption in the Catholic Church, and 2) a twice-divorced former Miss Wichita (a mother of three with a photographic memory) investigating rampant corruption at a power plant.

Much like 2010's "Gasland" (environmental poisoning by fracking) and 2019's "Dark Waters" (environmental poisoning by DuPont's Teflon), "Erin Brockovich" is about Pacific Gas and Electric's groundwater poisoning via the chemical compound hexavalent chromium. As in the other films, cancer abounds.

America now appears to be in a state of complacent, pessimistic fatalism regarding the lies generated by corporate greed that physically poison our environment. We should all be whistleblowers in this day and age.

Hidden (and Not So Hidden) Talents

In the early 1990s, Erin Brockovich goes job hunting. With two ex-husbands and three mouths to feed, she's got no skills or education. She is, however, next-level resourceful, smart as a whip, with what appears to be a photographic memory, uncanny people skills, and certain, er, assets, shall we say, that—by wearing anything with a plunging neckline—allow her to apply feminine wiles to a degree best described as "weaponized."

Erin also embodies the phrase, "Rude, crude, and socially unacceptable." She's got a hair-trigger temper, a sizable chip on her shoulder, and is jam-packed with what Mad Magazine used to call "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions." She suffers neither fools nor haughty attitudes gladly, so if you're a lawyer talking down to her, you'll elicit the following response: "That's all you've got lady—two wrong feet in [expletive omitted] ugly shoes."

But she's charming! Because she's played by Julia Roberts at the pinnacle of her megawatt stardom trajectory ("Erin Brockovich" landed her an Oscar) and thus she bad-mouths/sweet-talks her way into lawyer Ed Masry's (Albert Finney) Southern California law firm as an assistant, ignoring all his requests to dress more appropriately for the office. Eventually, he's even putting a second mortgage on his house to be able to afford the massive lawsuit she talks him into taking on.

No Coincidences

She may be a lowly assistant, but she's got a world-class talent for sleuthing and picks up on details others might miss. She notices when things don't add up, and having the type of curiosity that tends to unravel



(Below) The real Erin Brockovich.

(Below left) Eight-month-old Beth Brockovich (Emily Marks) and mom Erin Brockovich.

(Bottom) Lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney, R) addresses a meeting of plaintiffs regarding what they can expect in terms of medical compensation from the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in "Erin Brockovich."



(Above) Lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney) and his assistant Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts), in "Erin Brockovich." (Right) Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts), George (Aaron Eckhart), and Beth Brockovich (Emily Marks). (Far right) Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts) fishing a poisoned frog out of a chemical plant's holding pond.

sweaters and untie knots, she randomly uncovers a paper trail leading to the sleepy, dusty town of Hinkley, California. There, many people have many forms of rashes and cancers, not to mention deformed barnyard animals.

Why? It's the chromium-6-contaminated runoff that's seeped into the groundwater for years because the nearby Pacific Gas and Electric power plant was too cheap to use chemical basin liners in its holding ponds.

As I said about "Spotlight," director Tom McCarthy demonstrated "that the story is all about how you tell it. Because legal document scanning, periodical perusing, legalese-spewing, along with reporter meetings, reporters sitting in stuffy offices waiting for interviews, and so on, are all otherwise guaranteed yawn-fests."

"Erin Brockovich" naturally contains many of the same ingredients, but director Steven Soderbergh, like McCarthy before him, finds ways to keep the tension turned up throughout, in order to make such dull ingredients very tasty.

Pit Bull

Brockovich's people skills and common touch are generated from a deep well of empathy, and the situation also triggers her mothering protectiveness. Even male lions know not to mess with a female guarding cubs, and so boss Ed Masry comes up short trying to stem the tide of Erin's crusade for the people of Hinkley, and crusades along with her, eventually suing PG&E to the tune of \$333 million in compensatory and punitive damages to local people injured by the company's chemical negligence.

Masry refers to Erin as a "secret weapon." What else would you call a diamond in the rough made up of pit-bull determination, a beautiful but trashy appearance, and a potty mouth that hides a world-class brain?



And just like Erin is Masry's secret weapon, it's this quality that is also director Soderbergh's secret weapon; we delight in the fact that Erin has no Harvard law degree but out-lawyers the lawyers like "The Rock" roundly trouncing competitors while calling them "Jabronis" and telling them to drink tall glasses of "shut-up juice." "Erin Brockovich" makes you feel like one person really can make a difference. (It is, after all, based on a true story.)

We should all be whistleblowers in this day and age.

Ultimately, though, the true secret weapon of "Erin Brockovich" the movie is Julia Roberts. She presents us with this tasty enchilada of a character: Wrapped in the tortilla of someone too clueless to comprehend her trashy, job-interview-destroying wardrobe, not to mention her salty sailor talk on the witness stand, is the delicious filling of a woman who sees medical records in a real estate transaction, hunts down a chemistry professor to learn about why three ions of chromium are benign and six are toxic, and can memorize over 600 client phone numbers like it's nothing. She has the same effect, when entering a verbal confrontation, as Bruce Lee ripping off his tank top, crab-walking around his opponent, and doing his scary caterwauling battle cry.

Harley Guy

Aaron Eckhart plays George, the Fu-Manchu-sporting biker who lives next door and eschews his bike to become Erin's babysitter, beck-and-call handyman, glorified personal assistant, and, oh yeah, lover. It's the movie's weak point. No self-respecting biker would deal with that amount of stress and nagging with his bike sitting right there. Then again, maybe he'd make an exception for a Miss Wichita. And maybe he did, since this is based on a true story.

That said, Eckhart and Roberts have good chemistry, and he's believable as a guy who loves kids. And probably the best part of the whole film is when Erin schleps the unsuspecting George with her to deliver the good news to a particularly forlorn client (Marg Helgenberger). The grin on George's face when he sees the look of disbelief—that her family will receive a vast sum of money—is worth everything.

"Erin Brockovich" won four additional Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor (Finney), and Best Original Screenplay.

Nobody likes corruption, except for those on the take, and this film reminds us of the chutzpah required to bring it to light.



ALL PHOTOS IN PUBLIC DOMAIN US



"The Slav Epic: No. 2: The Celebration of Svantovit: When Gods Are at War, Salvation Is in the Art," 1912, by Alphonse Maria Mucha. Egg tempera and oil on canvas, 20 feet by 26.5 feet. National Gallery in Prague.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Salvation Through Art: 'The Celebration of Svantovit'

ERIC BESS

There are historical moments when we turn our backs on the divine and suffer for it, but the traditional arts can always serve as a link back.

Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), who worked before and after the independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918, believed that art serves a spiritual purpose. Mucha spent much of his early life in France creating commercial art. He became very popular for the style of this work, a style that became known as Art Nouveau. But Mucha wasn't interested in creating this type of art. He was more interested in creating national and spiritual art.

According to AlfonsMucha.org, Mucha "declared that art existed only to communicate a spiritual message, and nothing more; hence his frustration at the fame he gained through commercial art, when he wanted always to concentrate on more lofty projects that would ennoble art and his birthplace."

It wasn't long, however, before Mucha got his wish: He returned home to the Czech Republic to begin working on a series of 20 paintings, whereby he celebrated the divine and the origins of his homeland.

This large-scale project was initially ridiculed. Many thought it was an outdated and obsolete endeavor. Also, the rise of communism didn't help the popularity of traditional and spiritual artworks like Mucha's "Slav Epic," which were out-of-step with the Communist Party's requirements for the artistic style of "social realism."

After being arrested and questioned by the Gestapo, Mucha died of pneumonia in 1939 at the age of 78.

The Celebration of Svantovit

The paintings of "The Slav Epic" are nationalist and spiritual in nature. They depict the history of the Slavs in terms of folklore, paganism, and Christianity. I will focus on the second painting of the series, titled "The Slav Epic: No. 2: The Celebration of Svantovit: When Gods Are at War, Salvation Is in the Art."

Mucha created a large and elaborate scene, which depicts several things. In the lower half of the composition, people are shown celebrating the god Svantovit at the Arkona temple in Rügen. Rügen, located off the Pomeranian coast in the Baltic Sea, is Germany's largest island.

Svantovit was the most powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing god of the Slavs. Svantovit was often depicted with four heads, through which he could see and prophetically know the whole world. He also carried a horn representing abundance, a bow representing protection, and rode a white horse.

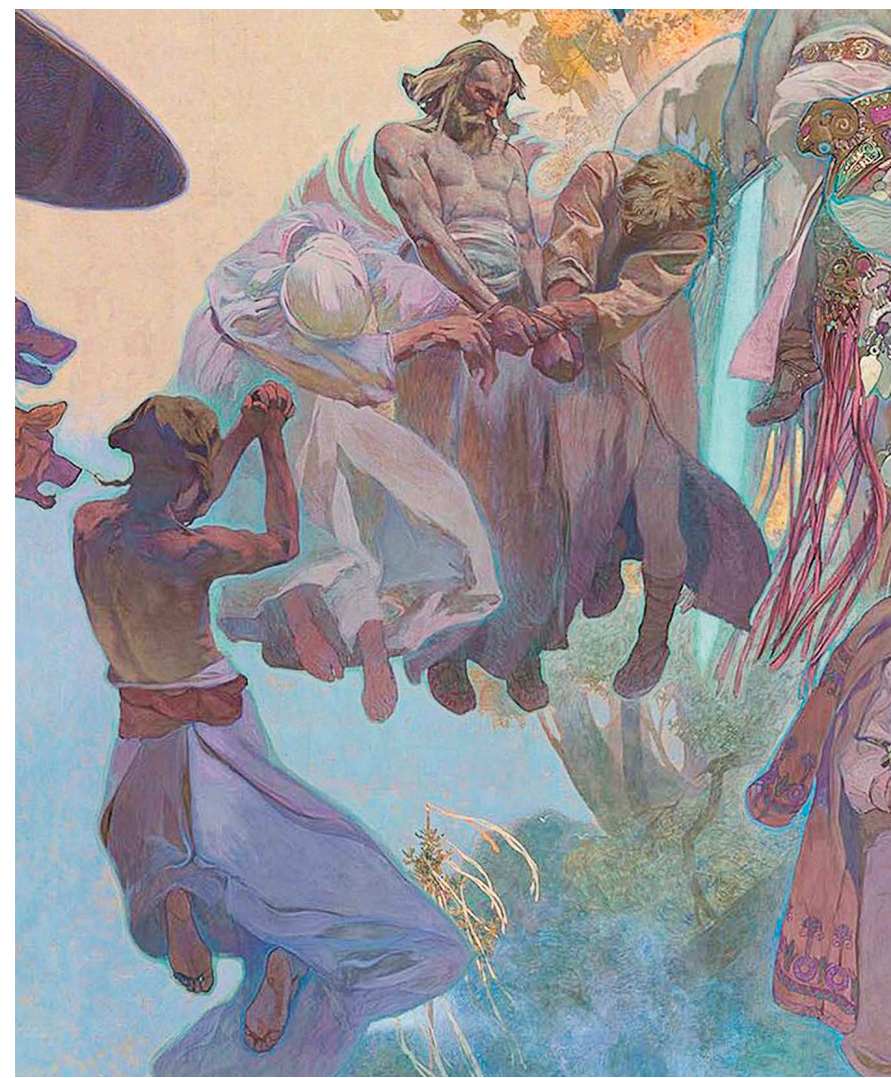
Once a year, during the harvest period, the Slavs would celebrate and worship Svantovit. Mucha depicted this celebration. People are shown dressed in white, dancing, eating, and celebrating.

The Prophecy

In the top half of the composition, however, a battle is about to begin. This battle seems to predict the future of the Slavs after they are invaded by the Germanic tribes.

The Germanic god, Thor, is at the top left of the composition and is leading his warriors and dogs to attack the Slavic god. In the same group of figures, a man is shown defending both himself and another, who is dressed in white, with his shield and sword.

To the right of Thor's dogs are six more figures. The first figure closest to the dogs ap-



(Above) A man praying and, to his right, three in bondage.

(Bottom left) Svantovit, with two of his four heads shown, holding a blue sword pointing downward. Both he and a dead man ride the god's white horse.

(Bottom right) Thor, his dogs and warriors, and a man defending both himself and another, who is dressed in white.

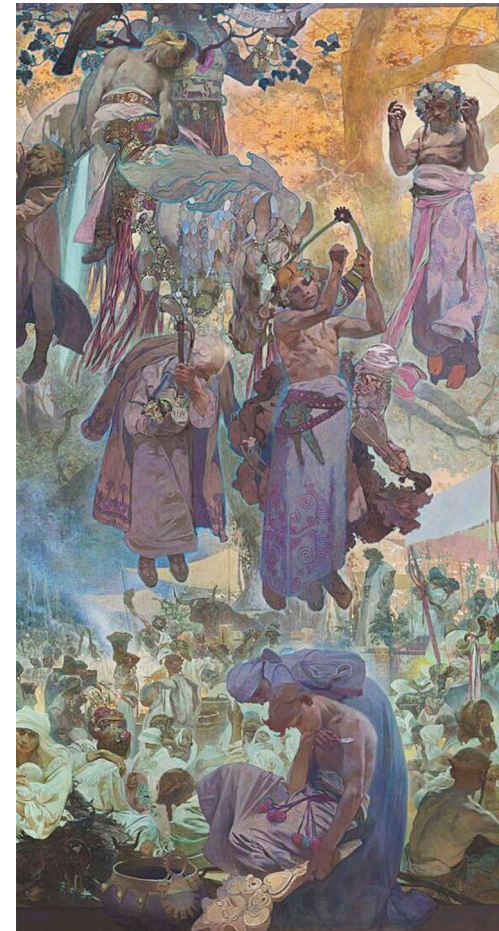
pears to pray to Svantovit, who can be seen at the very top of the composition with two heads holding a horn behind the white horse.

Praying to Svantovit doesn't seem to help, however. Upon scanning right, one sees the next three figures shown with their wrists bound as if they have been captured and enslaved. The figure immediately to the right of them is dead, riding on Svantovit's horse.

Mucha depicts Svantovit with a sword made of blue light instead of a bow. This sword symbolizes the god's protection, but he does not hold it up to defend the people from the threat of Thor. Instead, Svantovit points it down toward the people as if they are to protect themselves.

Near the horse's head, three figures begin to descend back down to those celebrating, while one figure seems to ascend at the far right of the composition.

The three descending figures are playing musical instruments as they descend. Right below them are two figures: a young man who carves an image of the god and a woman who watches over his shoulder.



Artists and musicians descend to earth while a lone figure ascends to heaven.

Svantovit, having four heads, watches the scene unfold from above but also sees the future of the Slavic people: They will be invaded by outsiders and lose everything.

Divinely Inspired Arts

Mucha shows us a grand scene. The Slavic people celebrate their god Svantovit in the hopes of receiving a great harvest for the next year and protection from outside invaders.

Svantovit, having four heads, watches the scene unfold from above but also sees the future of the Slavic people: They will be invaded by outsiders and lose everything.

Svantovit, however, does not intervene. Instead, he points to those who worship him, and some figures, as if following his command, play musical instruments as they descend from above. At the very right, a figure seems to me to ascend as if reborn.

What might all of this mean? Why does Svantovit not raise his sword to protect the Slavs? Why does he instead point his sword below? Why do the descending figures play musical instruments, and why does the young man sculpt? Why does the lone figure to the right appear to ascend?

Mucha believed that art served only a spiritual purpose. The title of this painting suggests that salvation is in art when the gods are at war. The Slavs are fated to be invaded, which is a reflection of the ensuing battle between Thor and Svantovit. Is it that Svantovit, as a god who sees and knows all, has the wisdom to accept fate, and this is why he doesn't raise his sword in defiance?

Instead, he gives to those who celebrate him another way to salvation: art. Those who descend from heaven bring with them the heavenly arts, both musical and visual. Is it that these art forms, when they celebrate the heavens from which they descend, offer a form of salvation?

Even if they are not a direct form of salvation, is it possible that these art forms can point us back to that which can save us? Can they stir within us those things that make us get closer to the divine?

And is this why the lone figure to the right ascends? It's interesting that below at the celebration, there's a sea of people who are all dancing, celebrating, and worshipping. They are participating in group rituals. Yet this lone figure ascends by himself. Is it the case that the heavenly inspired arts invigorate a personal, individual relationship with the divine, a relationship that can result in the ascension of one's soul?

The arts are the very thing on which a culture is built and propagated. The arts are like a mirror we hold up to ourselves.

What are we currently saying about ourselves with our arts? What type of culture are we guilty of propagating? Is it possible that we, through our arts, can return to the divine?

Art has an incredible ability to point to what can't be seen so that we may ask "What does this mean for me and for everyone who sees it?" "How has it influenced the past and how might it influence the future?" "What does it suggest about the human experience?" These are some of the questions I explore in my series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart."

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

TRUTH TELLERS

Zinka Milanov: The Truth of the Soul

The most beautiful voice in the world

RAYMOND BEEGLE

How many centuries did it take to change a sigh and a groan into a song? We will leave that question to the anthropologists and musicologists, and focus our attention on the 19th century—the century of bel canto, beautiful singing—when the operas and songs of our great composers reached their full bloom and plumbed the depths of the human heart.

Ultimately, no one can prove that something is beautiful, but when many people of discernment say that Croatian soprano Zinka Milanov (1906–1989) has, says the *New York Times*, "the most beautiful voice in the world," one is prompted to take note. *Time Magazine* once wrote "as for sheer beauty of voice, Zinka Milanov cannot be rivaled." Another *New York Times* review reported "it was one of those eventful nights when Milanov was at her best, seemingly bewildered by the beauty of her own voice."

Certainly, the emotional power of Milanov's voice was overwhelming. The sound appeared to come from no particular place, but simply became present, filling every contour and crevice of the hall. It has been described as a golden trumpet, a sapphire, a dark bell, but these descriptions say little. Words can tell us almost nothing about vocal beauty.

In the Renaissance, treatises were written on vocal quality and vocal technique, but they do us little good and leave us wondering: How did they really sound? We'll never know, but due to recording technology, we have over a century of great singing documented in ever increasing exactness. It bears witness to the bel canto tradition, its style, and expansive temperament.

Early cylinder recordings from the 1890s make possible a glimpse of all this, and as technology improved, more vocal qualities were revealed.

It has been described as a golden trumpet, a sapphire, a dark bell, but these descriptions say little. Words can tell us almost nothing about vocal beauty.

The male voice, because of its lower overtones, was the first to become available to us. Mattia Battistini (1856–1928), who sang with Verdi, recorded late in his life, giving us a sense of the style and vast dramatic scope of both singer and composer. As well, when one hears Alessandro Moreschi (1858–1922) sing "Ideale" or "Ave Maria," one hears the highly charged emotional parameters of that time.

It was not until the 1940s, however, that recordings of the female voice began to resemble anything like what one hears in live concert. It is possible to read between the lines, so to speak, in the earlier offerings of Elisabeth Rethberg or Rosa Ponselle, but only in the 1950s was there success in reflecting the true sound of the great sopranos. Kirsten Flagstad and Zinka Milanov were among the first artists to have the opulence of their singing put to disc and preserved for future generations.

Awakening to the Voice

Perhaps the reader might be interested in an autobiographical aside at this point. I was born into a lower-middle-class house-



Zinka Milanov as the title role in "Tosca," photographed by Alfredo Valente in 1946.

hold where there were no books, no pictures on the wall, and my mother had the radio tuned to the endless march of the hit parade. That was all I knew of music.

Then one day, when I was 10 or 11, a neighbor said to me, "Raymond! Come here and listen to something!" It was Zinka Milanov singing "Pace mio Dio." I had never heard an operatic voice before. My reaction? Again, one can't begin to use words; they are far less expressive than music, but I must try to tell you. It was like looking through a telescope for the first time and sensing the vast universe one only guessed at before: its grandeur, its infinitude, and behind that, a meaning and purpose we feel but cannot explain.

Of course, one simply reacts to music at first. Only later do we examine the causes underlying the reaction. Only later, therefore, did I begin to become aware of some important things. First of all, this voice had a wider range of pitches than those of popular singers; it had an immense dynamic range, great emotional power, and a profusion of color.

Then, I considered the words. "God, give me peace!" she sang. So, the spiritual aspect of great music became apparent to me. God was present, the higher world, a world of nobility and wonder, the perplexities and pain of life transformed into timeless beauty.

Milanov's great singing did not demand an explanation. It demanded only my attention. "Listen with all your soul," the great Russian poet Apollon Maikov wrote. These days we are unused to listening carefully, let alone listening with all our soul! However, it is the only way, and it suffers no boundaries of social class, intelligence, or education. It is there for us.

I list below some recorded moments of Milanov's sublime artistry that have for half a century moved me, filled me with wonder, and possibly made me a better human being. Now that all music is available through numerous venues, I give only a title and date, and ask that you "listen with all your soul."

If one cannot describe great music, or a great performance, one

can certainly say something about its impact on the listener. One feels added to, enriched, nourished. One feels that something that lies beyond what can be said or sung has been hinted at, and that we have been told the truth.

After a Milanov performance, there was a general sense of connection with the others who had heard what we had heard. As we walked out of the theater and into the streets, we seem to have been changed, become gentler, more respectful of each other because of our shared experience. There was an unspoken understanding, fleeting though it might be, that the needs of the human heart are the same in each of us, that each life is as precious and sacred as we know our own to be. Only art has such power to carry this great message, and only art—not laws, not governments—will ultimately bring the peace that we, for centuries, have longed for.

Raymond Beegle has performed as a collaborative pianist in the major concert halls of the United States, Europe, and South America; has written for The Opera Quarterly, Classical Voice, Fanfare Magazine, Classic Record Collector (UK), and the New York Observer. Beegle has served on the faculty of The State University of New York-Stony Brook, The Music Academy of the West, and The American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. He has taught in the chamber music division of The Manhattan School of Music for the past 28 years.

Studio Recordings

"Pace mio Dio" ("La Forza del Destino") 1953
 "O Patria Mia" ("Aida") 1953
 "D'amor sull'ali rosse" ("Il Trovatore") 1952
 "Daleko m'e moj Split" (Croatian folk song) 1941
 "O Lovely Moon" ("Rusalka") 1958

Live Recordings

"Tosca" (London) 1957
 "Andra Chénier" (Metropolitan Opera) 1957
 "Rigoletto" (Madison Square Garden) 1944

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POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Modern Classic That Celebrates Our Common Humanity

IAN KANE

Christmas is the time of year (yes, even in 2020) when hearts are warmed with good cheer and kindness, and when the air fills with that giddy happiness at hearing children caroling and at the aromas from our traditional Christmas meals.

But it can be a lonely time if you're overseas. As someone who was in the military, I can tell you that it can be tough being away from home during the holidays—especially Christmas. Difficult as it was, I could never have imagined celebrating the venerable holiday with our enemies.

But that is just what happened on the Western Front in World War I, as detailed in the 2005 film "Joyeux Noël" ("Merry Christmas"). During one cold Christmas Eve in 1914, at scattered spots along the front line between the Allies and the Germans, soldiers on both sides called a truce and laid down their arms to celebrate together in a show of transcendental brotherly love.

Telling this tale, which included managing a massive cast of actors and background extras while attempting to tap into the magical energy of that specific place and time in history, would be a herculean effort for anyone. Incredibly, French director Christian Carion took on this monumental task; it was only his third film at that time (he also directed the notable 2001 film "The Girl From Paris"—his first feature) and pulled it off deftly.

The film is primarily told from the perspective of its five lead actors. German Lt.

Horstmayer (Daniel Brühl) is eyeing his allied counterparts, Scotsman Lt. Gordon (Alex Ferns) and French Lt. Audebert (Guillaume Canet), across a swath of the front lines called "No Man's Land." We also have German tenor Nikolaus Sprink (Benno Fürmann, with singing by Rolando Villazón) and his beautiful Danish partner and lover, Anna Sorensen (Diane Kruger, with singing by Natalie Dessay), the pair who emerge as a major catalyst for the peace to come.

In the days leading up to Christmas, Nikolaus, a private in the German Army (and distinguished tenor), is ordered to perform for a group of German officers in an occupied area far from the front lines. There, he is reunited with Anna, a soprano who has a considerable level of acclaim in her own right.

Sprink returns to the front lines, this time with Anna, who is more than happy to join him in his efforts to soothe his comrades through song. Their hope is that they can give some measure of serenity to the war-weary troops, if only for a short period of time.

True artists who know music has no bounds, Nikolaus and Anna proceed to serenade the soldiers on both sides of the battle lines. To their surprise, their beautifully melodic Christmas songs serve as a sort of primer that ignites an overwhelming and spontaneous sense of goodwill among all of the combatants present—since the Allies and Germans alike are familiar with the age-old songs.

First, the Scottish bagpipes begin to chime in. They are soon joined by the voices of the soldiers from both sides as they



German Lt. Horstmayer (Daniel Brühl, L) and French Lt. Audebert find a good deal to bond over despite their fighting on opposite sides during World War I, in "Joyeux Noël."

begin to sing along. In a dramatic scene, Nikolaus risks his life by walking, as he sings, into No Man's Land, a space between the enemies' lines, ghastly now with bodies from both sides lying unburied.

But instead of shooting his head off, the Allied and German soldiers rise up from their trenches and leave their weapons behind. The men greet each other in a moment of peace and transcendental harmony and togetherness. Since it is early in the war, food and drink are plentiful, and the men break bread and enjoy libations together.

However, while the truce is unfolding, news of it quickly travels up the chain of command to the top brass of all three countries concerned. At the command level, the truce is viewed as a threat to their objectives and is considered an illegal ceasefire. What consequences will befall the soldiers? Will Nikolaus and Anna be able to handle the repercussions or be viewed as traitors?

A Film That Transcends Human Bounds

Under the firm guidance of Carion, this film expertly depicts the compassion of the human spirit, as well as the dark forces that can encroach on it. This is not your typical Hollywood fare, where everything is distilled down to either sappy sentimentality or gratuitous displays of violence (or both). It resists the usual war movie clichés and delves deeper into the spiritual component of humanity that we all share.

I've never read Stanley Wientraub's book "Silent Night," which chronicled the special

Christmas Eve that this film covers (but is not specifically based on), but now I'm inspired to. The metaphor of the book's title alone fits perfectly with a time and place where, at least for a little while, all of the guns stopped firing and a divine presence graced a bloody, war-torn patch of land.

I think that we can all learn something from the Christians who were present that night on both sides of the battle lines and take a more hopeful perspective of unity heading into the New Year of 2021—one of healing and goodwill. Let's start from the obvious baseline: We are all Americans.

With incredibly powerful imagery and acting performances, and easy to understand yet profound messages, "Joyeux Noël" is a rare cinematic achievement that, frankly, should be required viewing during the Christmas season.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

'Joyeux Noël'

Director
Christian Carion

Starring
Diane Kruger, Benno Fürmann, Guillaume Canet

Running Time
1 hour, 56 minutes

Rated
PG-13

Release Date
Nov. 9, 2005 (France)

★★★★★



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