

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

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Where do we
turn if we still feel
a longing for role
models?

A hero for all time: the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, as seen inside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In Need of Inspiration? Let's Visit Some Heroes From Our Past.

JEFF MINICK

When we think of contemporary heroes, figures we admire for their courage when confronted by physical danger or who defend goodness and justice at great personal sacrifice, we may remember such people as the first responders who charged into the Twin Towers on 9/11 to rescue those trapped inside. Perhaps we've read of the exploits of the soldiers who performed bravely on the battlefields of the Middle East over the last 30 years and who often saved the lives of their comrades. Or maybe that woman who stuck by the truth she posted on Facebook despite all the hatred and calumny thrown at her comes to mind.

We may have witnessed heroism in our own community: the cop who drags a man from a burning vehicle, the mom who stands up alone before the school board

to voice an unpopular opinion, or the teenager who defends his younger brother from a mob of bullies.

In the summer of 1970, I had the privilege of meeting a recognized hero, Captain Paul Bucha, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in Vietnam, at the United States Military Academy. Another cadet asked Capt. Bucha to tell us how he'd won the medal. Bucha smiled at him and then said, "I'm a lover, not a fighter."

In my eyes, that mild refusal to answer added another layer of gold to Bucha's medal.

But where do we turn if we still feel a longing for role models, exemplars who might stiffen our spines and serve as guiding lights in the face of hardship? Where else can we find men and women of virtue and honor who rouse our admiration and infuse us with courage?

It's simple, really. We step into the past.

Continued on Page 4

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THEATER

Comedy and the Natural Theater

ROBERT COOPERMAN

"Dying is easy. Comedy is hard."

These lines, attributed to actor Edmund Gwenn (Santa in the original "Miracle on 34th Street"), sum up the state of comedy today with one important twist. Given the state of contemporary humor: Dying is easy. Comedy is nonexistent.

As a culture, we have been instructed not to laugh anymore and definitely not to enjoy ourselves unless we are miserable. So careful are we that we might offend another with even the most innocuous comment, we have become essentially a humorless society, overseen by scolds. The Natural Theater—the antidote to the Theater of Misery—seeks to reintroduce humor into our lives.

In coining the term "Natural Theater," in addition to restoring humor, I aim to restore protagonists to a state capable of self-reflection and heroism, rather than to one of victimization by oppressors, as "Theater of Misery," another term I've coined, would have it.

One of the built-in problems with comedy is that we often don't know what to do with it, much less how to do it effectively. Aristotle, the first theater critic, didn't have a lot to say about comedy, at least that we know about. In his "The Poetics," the first and most important work on dramatic literature, we learn that Aristotle thought comedy to be somewhat of a lesser artform than tragedy and that comic characters were more frivolous than their tragic counterparts. They were, as he put it, "men ... worse than others."

But the Theater of Misery has in many respects turned Aristotle on his ear by elevating those "worse than others" into a prominence they do not deserve. The Natural Theater, therefore, strives to put the "worse" man in his proper place, while elevating, of course, those who are worthy of our esteem. In so doing, it never abandons humor.

There's no doubt that comedy in ancient Greece, a source for Natural Theater, often served a greater purpose than mere entertainment. The great Greek comic writer Aristophanes juxtaposed comedy with more serious issues. Arguably his most famous play, "Lysistrata," satirizes the seemingly endless Peloponnesian War by using elements of farce, wordplay, and slapstick to make its point. The women in "Lysistrata" do not want equal rights; they want the killing to end and their men home.

Aside from the Greeks, we have great comic playwrights such as Molière and Oscar Wilde, who used comedy to point out pretensions

and hypocrisy among those who profess an air of respectability. (Molière's "The Misanthrope" and Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" come to mind.) The comedy in their work comes from audience members laughing at the foibles of others while at the same time retaining the ability to laugh at themselves. After all, who among us does not have foibles?

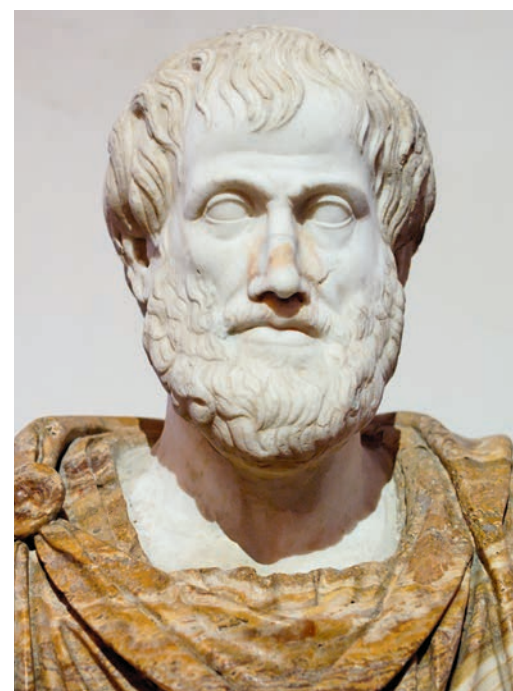
Even the formulaic comedies of Neil Simon—as weak and television-inspired as they are (more on television later)—allow us the privilege of poking fun at other people's idiosyncrasies while believing that we are free of similar peculiarities.

The human eccentricities that were once the subject of comedic plays are now seen to be too hurtful or, in our contemporary parlance, "hateful" to be allowed. The sometimes not-so-gentle attacks on characters deserving of scorn have now become symptomatic of an oppressive society. We have positioned outcasts as misunderstood victims of our society.

In an ironic twist, those we once laughed at are now the characters we must take most seriously. One can imagine an effeminate fop, such as the titular character of George Etherege's "The Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter," causing teeth gnashing today among the socially conscious at the alleged homophobia of his demeanor, even though fops were generally heterosexual. Or consider the portrayal of Noah's gossiping wife in the medieval cycle plays, and how her portrayal—meant to be comic relief for the serious work of ark building—might be seen as misogynistic by the sensitive souls of today. With so much investigation and consternation surrounding the arts, it's no wonder we're losing our ability to laugh at ourselves.

What is the cause of our comedic writing woes, and how do we recover? I believe that a number of factors have led to the dearth of effective comedic writing. One of them, obviously, is the turn that our culture has made toward the glorification of the oppressed. This has, I suspect, made our playwrights fearful of offending anybody, unless, of course, the offended does not fit into the assigned categories of victims.

Another is television, which in itself is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, television comedy is the source of endless superficialities with a constant emphasis on sexual conquest—or failure. To be sure, desires of the flesh



Bust of Aristotle. Marble, Roman copy after a Greek bronze original by Lysippos from 330 B.C. Ludovisi Collection, The National Museum of Rome, Altemps Palace.



"The Misanthrope" makes fun of a man who has no tolerance for human frailty. Front page of "The Misanthrope," 1666, by Molière. Engraving from the 1719 edition of the play, from Octave Uzanne's 1885 book "Le Livre."



Frontispiece and title page of "Tartuffe or The Impostor" from a 1739 collected edition of his works in French and English, printed by John Watts. The engraving depicts Orgon hiding under a table at his wife Elmire's request to prove that the "pious" Tartuffe is actually a lecherous hypocrite. Private Collection of S. Whitehead.



have been comically portrayed onstage for centuries. But never before have they been so consistently presented with an eye toward elevating the perpetrator and considering sexual yearnings to be just another day at the office.

Molière and Oscar Wilde used comedy to point out pretensions and hypocrisy.

Molière's sexual predator Tartuffe is ridiculed, finally getting his comeuppance at the end of the play. Is there any comeuppance for today's lascivious men who seem to be everywhere since the sexual revolution of the 1960s? No, usually these men get a pat on the back—"Way to go, bro!"

On the other hand, television, particularly through its news providers, promotes the aforementioned cultural turn, creating the perception that the vast majority in this country see the world as a split between victims and oppressors, while the destructive minority is hopelessly traditional and in great need of reeducation.

I suspect that the opposite is true: The "traditional" folks are everywhere, but the

often literally destructive minority run the show. Comedy is a casualty in either case.

Natural and Funny Theater

The Natural Theater can break the hold that those resistant to humor have on the arts. This impacts not only theater but also stand-up comedy as well.

First, we must produce the comedies of old and do so proudly. We must present them free of modern-day analysis—Lysistrata is not unhappy with the status quo, and Kate is a shrew. We must expect directors to emphasize the comedy of situations and characters and to let audience members enjoy themselves without guilt or an unnecessary examination of societal ills except as it serves the plot. For goodness' sake, let's have fun!

Second, we must start writing such plays again. Contrary to what some believe, theater is not and has never been a safe space. We should be unafraid to point out societal ills as a subject of our ridicule—

despite the majority of the artistic community telling us that we have no right to do so if our spoof is not of a particular ideology. We should have no fear of poking fun at misfit characters, whose choices in life make them subject to mockery. They are not victims! Therefore, they are fit to instruct us toward a more dignified path in life, lest the same fate await us.

The Natural Theater welcomes comedy as much as it does tragedy, but it wants comedy to be every bit as cautionary and redemptive as more serious fare. You think that's easy to do? Just ask Edmund Gwenn.

Robert Cooperman is the founder of Stage Right Theatrics, a theater company dedicated to the preservation of the founders' vision through the arts. Originally from Queens, N.Y., he now lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he earned his doctorate at The Ohio State University.

Probably the most famous ancient Greek play satirizes the dynamics between men and women. At the play's end, Lysistrata negotiates peace and the end of the Peloponnesian War in a scene from Macmillan Films' 2008 staging of Aristophanes's "Lysistrata," directed by James Thomas in New York.



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TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In Need of Inspiration? Let's Visit Some Heroes From Our Past.

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Distant Bugles

In "A Worse Place Than Hell: How the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg Changed a Nation," biographer and Pulitzer Prize winner John Matteson focuses on five Americans associated with this December 1862 murderous clash between the armies of the North and the South. Future Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., writers Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott, and army chaplain Arthur Fuller stood with the North; the young John Pelham served as an officer in the horse artillery for the South.

The day after receiving his discharge from the Union Army, Fuller acquired a musket and convinced his superiors to allow him to take part in the fighting in Fredericksburg. Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott worked as nurses in hospitals in the aftermath of this vicious fighting, and both, particularly Alcott, were broken in health from those duties and suffered what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorder. The previously twice-wounded Holmes spent the battle in a hospital tent, "stretched out miserably sick with dysentery." Meanwhile, Pelham performed brilliantly during this engagement, holding up a large part of the Northern advance with two cannons. A few months later, he would fall on another Virginia battlefield.

Also included in this fine history are excellent portraits of Abraham Lincoln; Southern cavalier Jeb Stuart; Walt Whitman's brother George, who was one of the first to enlist in the Union Army in 1861; and other figures involved in the war in the last half of 1862.

New England Nurse

This company assembled by Matteson provides us with several individuals who might inspire us by their sacrifices during America's bloodiest war. The agonies and emotional scars suffered by Louisa May Alcott during this conflict, the consequence of her service as a nurse in Washington, D.C., were new to me. We remember Alcott today for her novels for young readers—I used to teach "Little Women"—but I had no idea of the trauma and illness she underwent in trying to help wounded and dying soldiers. She served only three months in the wards, fell ill with typhoid, and was accompanied home to Boston by her father, where for a time she was out of her head with fever and with the horrible memories of the blood and anguish she'd witnessed in the infirmary. She never again fully recovered her good health.

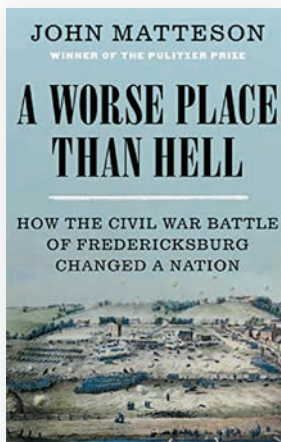
As I made my way through Matteson's history, I found Alcott's courage and perseverance both heartrending and inspirational. In addition to the hardships she endured as a nurse, she was afflicted with bouts of depression in her earlier years, deeply affected by a sister's death, and worked in various jobs to help her mother make ends meet in the wake of her father's poor financial decisions.

Here was a spirit from the past who had bravely faced a mountain of troubles and kept on climbing.

The Patriotic Artillerist

Today, some Americans heap contempt on those who fought for the Confederacy, in some cases tearing down statues of Southern soldiers and statesmen, or demanding that we erase their names from our history books. Here's the problem with such deletions: When we participate in this reckless destruction, or unthinkingly support it, we render ourselves blind to the nuances of history.

John Pelham is a case in point. In a letter home after fighting at Manassas in the first major battle of the war, this young man from Alabama described the terrible carnage of the fighting that day: "I have passed over the battle field and seen the mangled forms of men and horses in frightful abundance. Men without heads, without arms, and others without legs. All this I have witnessed and more, till my heart sickens; and war



Writer John Matteson focuses on five Americans associated with the December 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg in "A Worse Place Than Hell."

Some present during or soon after one of the Civil War's bloodiest encounters, can offer us inspiration today. "Assault on Prospect Hill at the Battle of Fredericksburg," 1862, by Carl Röchling. Oil on canvas.

I still find sustenance in reading about the great people from the past, their accomplishments, their struggles, and even their failures.



is not glorious as novelists would have us believe."

But in the same letter, Pelham added: "We are battling for our rights and our homes. Ours is a just war, a holy cause. The invader must meet the fate he deserves and we must meet him as becomes us, as becomes men."

Despite the cause for which he fought—his father was a slaveholder, a practice rightly considered an abomination today—Pelham believed that essentials like our rights and homes are worth fighting and dying for. In a time when some of our own freedoms seem under assault, Pelham stands as a reminder that the protection of our natural rights may demand costly sacrifices.

'A Man of God'

John Matteson titles the chapter in which he introduces Arthur Fuller "A Man of God."

Like John Pelham, Boston minister Arthur Fuller believed so passionately in a cause that he willingly laid down his life for it.

Frail and missing an eye from a boyhood incident, Fuller nonetheless volunteered to serve as a chaplain in the Union Army. He joined the 16th Massachusetts, traveled with them to Northern Virginia, and tried to keep up the spirits of the soldiers and tend their wounds,

yet was eventually sent home to Boston because of his poor health. When he later returned to his regiment, it was to say goodbye. He joined the men just before the Battle of Fredericksburg, delivered a final sermon and a farewell, and then, for reasons we will never fully understand, and with his discharge papers in his pocket, he put on the coat of a staff officer, picked up a musket, and died in the first day's fighting.

In one of the few of his sermons ever published, Fuller said: "Faith which promotes a good life insures also a good death. ... He who lives well always dies well."

As Matteson tells us, those who knew Chaplain Fuller debated whether he should have joined the battle that day. That point aside, to my way of thinking, there can be little doubt that the man underwent what he might have called a good death, sacrificing his life for a just cause in which he so fervently believed.

O Captain, My Captain

Walt Whitman revered Abraham Lincoln. Matteson tells us that the poet saw the president on several occasions, and he left behind two poems memorializing Lincoln—"O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard

Bloom'd"—which remain today in our anthologies and schoolbooks. Like Arthur Fuller, John Pelham, and hundreds of thousands of others, Abraham Lincoln died as a martyr to a cause.

"A Worse Place Than Hell" reminds us of the terrible burdens borne by Lincoln during his presidency, the agonizing decisions he had to make, and the political storms in his cabinet and in the government with which he had to contend. By combining sketches of Lincoln and his troubled presidency along with Whitman's impressions of him, Matteson gives his readers insights into Lincoln's determination to persevere in his efforts to save the Union and later, to eradicate slavery.

When we're going through tough times or beset by moral dilemmas, Lincoln can serve as an example of a man who kept to what he perceived as the right path.

Visitations and Vision

When I was a kid, a series called "The Childhood of Famous Americans" captured my attention. I don't know how many of those orange- or blue-bound biographies passed through my hands, ranging from Robert E. Lee to George Washington Carver to Betsy Ross, but I needed the lessons in leadership

and life they taught, and their stories helped make me who and what I am today.

And even now, 60 years later and in my twilight years, I still find sustenance in reading about the great people from the past, their accomplishments, their struggles, and even their failures. Their stories encourage me to push ahead, to want to do the right thing, to become a better person. Louisa May Alcott, John Pelham, Chaplain Arthur Fuller, and a crowd of other Americans—their words and deeds can deposit a bit of steel in my spine and remind me of the good in the world, the ideals worthy of a fight, and the causes deserving my support and commitment.

These visitors from the past can lead us into the future.

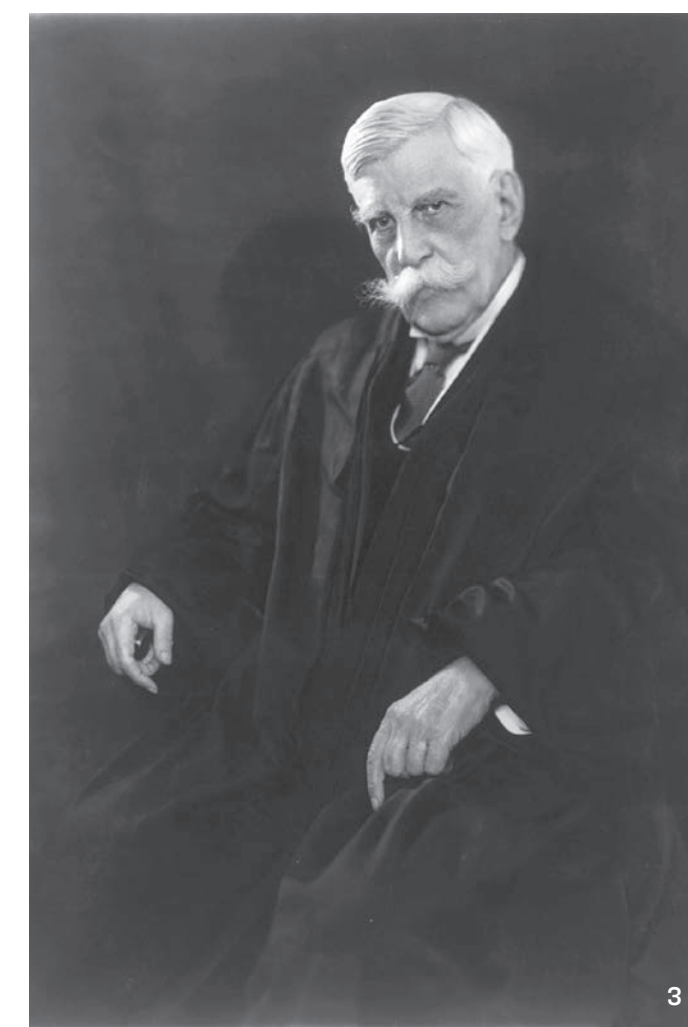
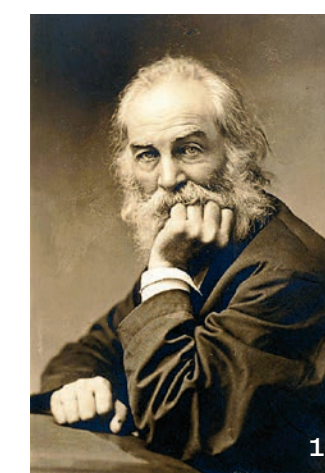
Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go"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



COBB'S AND KERSHAW'S TROOPS BEHIND THE STONE WALL.



(Left) The illustration by Allen C. Redwood shows the sunken road on Marye's Heights during the Battle of Fredericksburg, when approximately 3,000 Georgians under Thomas R.R. Cobb lined up in multiple ranks behind the stone wall, and another 3,000 were atop the slope behind it, along with their artillery; from the Mechanical Curator collection. (Above): The same view in 2010.

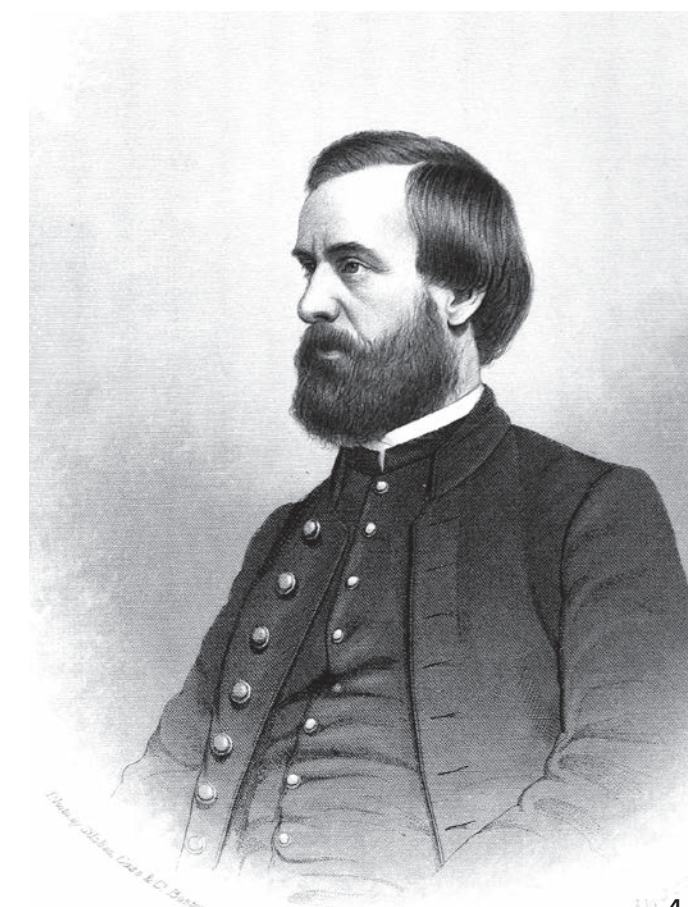


1. American poet Walt Whitman (shown here at about 50) revered Abraham Lincoln. From "A Life of Walt Whitman," by Henry Bryan Binns. Published by Methuen & Co., 1905.

2. Maj. John Pelham (1838–1863), Confederate Army artillery officer in the American Civil War, pictured here in 1858. Alabama Department of Archives and History.

3. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., circa 1930, spent the duration of the Battle of Fredericksburg in a field hospital with dysentery. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

4. Engraved portrait of clergyman Arthur Buckminster Fuller, from the 1864 book "Chaplain Fuller, Being a Life Sketch of a New England Clergyman and Army Chaplain."





WOLFGANG SAUBER/CC BY-SA 4.0

TRUTH TELLERS

Henri Amiel's Ardent Invitation to Converse With God

RAYMOND BEEGLE

How far can words reach? While celebrities like Victor Hugo, Henry James, George Meredith, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky were firing their volleys of prose at the world, an obscure Swiss professor, Henri Amiel (1821–1881), sat in his quiet room and wrote: “In the important questions of life we are always alone. Our deepest inner thoughts cannot be understood by others. The best part of the drama that goes on deep in our souls is a monologue, or, better to say, a very sincere conversation between God, our conscience, and ourselves.”

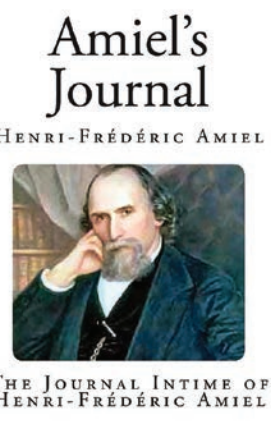
This modest Swiss professor challenged the immorality of his world by trying, as best he could, to live a moral life himself.

not free! I lack the strength to carry out my will.” His will, in this case, was to chronicle and order his thoughts. Discipline might have been difficult, as there are sometimes extended lapses between entries, but Amiel certainly did not fail in persistence. Slowly, patiently, he describes the outer world in which he moved, and reveals as well a marvelous inner world, full of wonder, compassion, love of truth, and, most of all, an ardent love of that great mystery to whom he prayed, and whom he called God.

The World Without

Traditional European society in Amiel's time was, as it had been for centuries, a scene of strife, class struggle, and injustice, despite its façade of prosperity and order. The earlier writers he most admired condemned it. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) railed against it in “Pensees.” He asked us to “Look around. What do the world's people think about it? They think about wealth and power; but they do not think at all about what it is to be human.” Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) asked, “How can people be happy if they are not educated to have high morals?”

Amiel thought that only one thing was needed: “to be what we ought to be, to accomplish our mission and our work. We have in ourselves an oracle which is always waiting, conscience, which is nothing else than God in us.” The truth of this observation is perhaps something we can hold fast to today. Surely the only good any of us can bring about comes from our own minds and hearts, our knowing ourselves. Whether it might influence a few people or a multitude is none of our affair.



(Above) This volume stunned Europe's highest circles when it became public.

(Top) A scene from the Book of Revelation on a dome fresco, 1733, by Paul Troger. Abbey church, Altenburg, Lower Austria.

The World Within

Amiel was gentler than Pascal and Kant, choosing to hope for better things through future generations, notably from children—“fresh additions of innocence and purity, which fight against the end of mankind and against our spoiled nature, and against our complete immersion into sin.” There is hope as well, and perhaps even consolation, in our passing on the collected wisdom of the great seers and, more importantly, by being an example, by living a just and kind life.

To combat the spoiled nature and the lies of our own time, we have a certain recourse: telling the truth ourselves, especially to ourselves. “Let us be truthful,” Amiel wrote. “This is the mystery of rhetoric and virtue, this is the greatest mystery, this is the highest achievement in art, and the major law of life.”

Our modest Swiss professor challenged the immorality of his world by trying, as best he could, to live a moral life himself. “Civilization is first of all a moral thing. Without truth, respect for duty, love of neighbor, virtue, everything is destroyed. The morality of a society is alone the basis of a civilization.”

He resisted the rampant materialism and vanity around him by living a spiritual life. Throughout the journal, he cites both the wisdom of the East and the wisdom of the West. Holy men of all nations, of all ages, all agree that the Kingdom of God is within. Amiel wrote: “I feel intensely that man, in everything he does, or is able to do that is beautiful, great, good, is only the organ and vehicle of something or someone higher than himself. This feeling is religion. The religious man observes with a thrill of sacred joy the phenomena of which he is the intermediary, without being the origin of them.”

The Birth of a Soul

It is the single soul—not government, not society—that brings humankind to a better place. It is the work within that imperceptibly changes the world without. Amiel says: “The process of life should be the birth of a soul. This is the highest alchemy, and this justifies our presence on earth. This is our calling and our virtue.” When the soul matures, it bears its own miraculous harvest, the ability “to see all things in God, to make one's own life a voyage toward the ideal, to live with composure and gratitude, sweetness and courage.”

Such a way of life has been the quiet, humble work of the great and the small that has gladly, patiently, been carried out over centuries. It is the living out of the prayer said in so many ways, in so many tongues, by all people of all faiths, “Thy kingdom come.” It will be answered in God's time.

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*, and 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.



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.



ALL PHOTOS BY MARVEL/DISNEYPLUS

‘Black Widow’: Finally a Real Summer Blockbuster for 2021

MARK JACKSON

I recently ranted about the ridiculous amounts of CGI used in “F9: The Fast Saga,” which has basically ruined the classic summer blockbuster and is turning American audiences' minds into mush. “Black Widow,” however, is a much better movie; it can be considered a real summer blockbuster.

Ironically, it's conceivably got more CGI. The difference being that this is pure fantasy, whereas the fast-car movies are supposed to be grounded in reality. So if all the characters in “Black Widow” have supernatural abilities that we choose to suspend our disbelief about, like, if they can fall a mile out of the sky, crater in the desert like Wile E. Coyote, and get up and shake it off, then the rest of the CGI foolishness is automatically drawn into the same category of disbelief suspension and therefore “makes sense.” Make sense?

Here's the deal: I'd put “Black Widow” up there in the top three most entertaining films of the MCU (Marvel Comics Universe). Why? Because it's funny, and it's got actual acting happening. And because the blistering fights ironically—due to the fact that Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) is a martial artist—lean more into the neighborhood of “Jason Bourne,” rather than Hulk-smashing, Ironman palm-zapping, and Spidey web-slinging. Which feels more real. And real, in the MCU, is a precious commodity. So basically you end up with a real-feeling fantasy flick instead of, as in the case of “F9,” a fake-feeling “real” flick, and that makes for a much more satisfying summer action movie.

The Overview

As you may remember, Natasha joined forces with Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and S.H.I.E.L.D. and put her assassin skills to good use. She assisted in recruiting new Avengers and ultimately saved half the lives in the universe by sacrificing her own life in 2019's “Avengers: Endgame.” So “Black Widow” is an origin story and sort of prequel, also a “how-she-fits-into-the-MCU” story. It's the 1990s. Older sister Natasha (Scarlett Johansson), little sister Yelena (Florence

Pugh), Mom Melina (Rachel Weisz), and Dad Alexei (David Harbour) are a “family” living in Ohio. So why do they have Russian names? Because they're embedded, undercover Russian spies, of course.

When the Americans sniff them out, they escape back to Mother Russia, where they cease to be the “family” they never actually were. The girls enter the Red Room program (a secret KGB program that uses eugenics and forced sterilization), which is sort of like the Red Sparrow program, except that instead of becoming sex spies, they're trained as Black Widow martial arts ninjatype spies. (This is the assassin program Natasha broke free from, to join the Avengers.)

Now we jump to the period between “Captain America: Civil War” and “Avengers: Infinity War.” The Avengers no longer exist. Natasha is a rogue agent on the run. Dreykov (Ray Winstone, best known as a staple of Guy Ritchie's British underworld thug movies) is a Russian kingpin who's figured out a way to use mind control on the tens of thousands of Red Room spy-girls, worldwide, against their will. That's not good. That's power that can be abused. And lots of girls who can be abused. And since Natasha and sister Yelena are themselves Red Room-trained Black Widows—they need to save all their sisters.

What You Get

The action in “Black Widow,” as mentioned, is more grounded in hand-to-hand combat, which, while also over-the-top, manages to rub off on all the rest of the mayhem and explosions and make them seem more real. For example, while Natasha has outrageous martial skills (not to mention the Wile E. Coyote cratering invention), she occasionally runs into superior fighters, such as the metallic skull-masked “Taskmaster.” These are smoking-hot fights, but you can see Natasha using her mind to outwit her stronger opponent, and that also confers a level of reality.

What's also riveting is the fact that among the four leads (the “family”), there are major family dysfunction issues of abandonment, treachery, and loneliness, the effects and



(Top) Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson, L) and her “sister” Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), in “Black Widow.”

(Above) Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) falling out of the sky and, in comic book fashion, surviving unscathed.

(Below left) Florence Pugh is a scene stealer in the film.

(Below right) David Harbour shows he can handle comedy.

(Bottom left) Dreykov (Ray Winstone, L) plays a mastermind criminal, and the Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko) is one of his tools.

(Below right) There's still plenty of action in this comic book caper: Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson, L) and Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh).

residues of which are all acted out with outstanding commitment to realism. Surprisingly touching for a comic book movie. Very surprising.

There are also themes, naturally, about legions of women being preyed upon by a distillation of the Epstein-Weinstein-Cosby-Ranieri ethos, but that's not to say that “Black Widow” takes itself too seriously. Make no mistake—it's a comic book movie. But a good one.

The cast is exceptional, and David Harbour is a revelation in comedic mode, but it's Florence Pugh who scene-steals through-out and makes it look easy. And that's no easy feat. Scarlett Johansson has been radiating charisma ever since, as an unknown, she completely stole 2001's “Ghost World” right out from under star Thora Birch's nose, but Pugh's star is now on the rise. Pugh's got a mesmerizing fire behind her green eyes and an animal-like magnetism that allows her to attract audience eyeballs like steel filings to a supermagnet.

The movie's highlights feature Johansson and Pugh milking the big sister-little sister routine for gags; much of which involves Yelena taking potshots at Natasha's Avenger status, calling her the least powerful Avenger, and razzing her superhero “landing pose.” She points out that whereas the male Avengers just do the standard, one-knee-one-arm touchdown, Natasha feels compelled to do an attention-grabbing, derrière-flaunting, dramatic lateral flourish. Pugh's a scene-stealing Terminator, and she'll be baack.

So, to sum up—Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow, the Avenger, died, and “Black Widow” is an origin story, prequel, and tribute. We get to see her story told in full and have clarified for us the character's decision to die, so as to give her Avenger teammates—and humanity—a chance at defeating Thanos. “Black Widow” shows us that Natasha's selflessness in making that kind of sacrifice is what sets her apart from the rest of the Avengers. “Black Widow” is an honor to her legacy and a final send-off.

One last observation: The “Black Widow” roundhouse kicks Russian communism and all of its obsessive compulsion to world-dominate, in the teeth, and that alone is worth the price of a movie ticket. You can watch it at home on Disney+ for \$29.99. But since it's no longer quarantine time, go see a summer blockbuster the old-fashioned way—in the theaters.

ARMCHAIR ART

‘The Director's Choice’ Online Exhibition by The National Gallery, London

LORRAINE FERRIER

With much of Europe gradually opening up after months of varying levels of lockdown, many of us may not be comfortable traveling across the Atlantic just yet.

It's not the same, but in these unprecedented times, we can take solace in online art offerings. One great option to see a world-renowned European collection is “The Director's Choice” online exhibition by The National Gallery, London.

The exhibition focuses on 20 artworks from the gallery's collection as curated and narrated by the gallery's director, Gabriele Finaldi. The exhibition came about after Finaldi wrote a series of emails, exploring his favorite works in the gallery's collection.

Finaldi began writing his insights after the gallery closed its doors during the March 2020 UK lockdown. Each week those musings, full of fascinating facts about the paint-

ing, the artist, and also the artwork's period, were sent out to the gallery's supporters. The emails proved so popular that “The Director's Choice” virtual exhibition was born.

From his emails, Finaldi selected 20 works for the exhibition. They span from the early-14th to the late-19th century and feature some of the Western World's greatest artists: Vermeer, Jan van Eyck, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt, to name a few.

Rembrandt's “Belshazzar's Feast” is the first picture that greets you when you visit the online show. You can listen to Finaldi's description of the painting or read the accompanying summary text; either way, it's a lively exploration of Rembrandt's painting. Hint: The audio recording reveals bonus insights.

“Standing in front of it, you feel physically caught up in the drama as though you yourself have sprung back from the table at the dazzling and disturbing appar-



THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

“The Director's Choice” virtual exhibition at The National Gallery was created with Moyosa Media. In the center is “Belshazzar's Feast,” circa 1636–1638, by Rembrandt.

tion,” Finaldi says enthusiastically on the audio recording as he describes Belshazzar's shock and bemusement at the hand and Hebrew words that appear before him.

The same sentiment of being “caught up in the drama” could be said about the entire exhibition. Finaldi's refreshing descriptions delightfully pull you into each painting, whether it's a historical painting or a portrait. For instance, of Giovanni Bellini's portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan, he says that “this sense of profoundly human immanence is something that not

all great portraits achieve.” He goes on to say: “Cover the right side of his face and he appears grave, as befits a Renaissance ruler; cover the left and he projects a kindly bonhomie.”

It's a treat to learn the director's insights, and it's a surefire way to bring visitors back to the gallery to see for themselves the masters' genius and brushstrokes.

To find out more about “The Director's Choice” at The National Gallery, London, visit NationalGallery.org.uk





"The Virgin With Angels (Song of Angels)," 1881, by William Bouguereau. Oil, 84 inches by 60 inches. Forest Lawn Museum, California.

REACHING WITHIN:
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Aligning With the Will of Heaven: 'The Virgin With Angels'

ERIC BESS

What is heaven's will? We may have heard that we should follow the will of heaven, but what does that mean? To me, the question feels a little blasphemous since my human thoughts about heaven might be unintentionally disrespectful to its actual grandeur.

This is not to say that we should not be considering what it means to behave as if we are beings of or on our way to heaven. But I do suggest that the thought should come with a high level of sincere piety and respect.

With that in mind, I was thinking about a painting I've seen repeatedly over the past decade or so. William Bouguereau's "The Virgin With Angels" has caused me to reflect on heaven's will.

Bouguereau Exhibits at the Salon of 1881

In the early 1880s, Bouguereau's technical ability to compose and paint pictures catapulted him to the heights of the Parisian art world. He was elected as vice chairman of the Society of French Artists, which was a newly established committee of artists that set the rules for and organized future Salons.

A Salon was the official, annual art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts

in Paris. According to the book "William Bouguereau: His Life and Works" by Damien Bartoli and Frederick C. Ross, the Salon was "the most significant Parisian event of the year." The first Salon produced by the Society of French Artists was the Salon of 1881 and exhibit Bouguereau's painting "The Virgin With Angels."

At the time that Bouguereau painted the religiously themed "The Virgin With Angels," impressionist painters were gaining popularity, and many of them had a distaste for Bouguereau and his art. An online biography of Bouguereau states that "Degas along with his close connections," for instance, "coined the term 'Bouguereauté' in a deprecating context, to describe any artistic style dependent on smooth and unnatural surfaces," meaning that impressionists were more interested in expressing nature's "impressions" on their senses rather than Bouguereau's pursuit of perfection and idealism.

With that said, Bouguereau maintained popularity with the general public and artistic elite during his lifetime. Bartoli and Ross share art critic Edouard Thierry's reaction to "The Virgin With Angels" at the Salon of 1881:

"The entire scene is bathed in tenderness. What can I say? Look elsewhere and you will not find such charm as that which springs from the veneration and love of this divine being, in what is most human in such holiness, in what is most simple and most modest."

"The Virgin With Angels" is a painting that is still popular today. According to Bartoli and Ross, "this astounding religious work singlehandedly broke a number of attendance and popularity records when exhibited in 2006 at the Getty Museum in Malibu, CA."

'The Virgin With Angels'

"The Virgin With Angels" depicts the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus at the left of the composition. Mary sits on a bench that appears to be of Corinthian design, which was the most ornate and last design style of classical Greco-Roman architecture. She holds Jesus on her lap, and they both are sound asleep.

The Virgin Mary is dressed in her typical colors of red, white, and blue. The white may represent her purity, the blue her connection to heaven, and the red her love for as well as the sacrifice of her son.

Accompanying the Virgin Mary and Jesus are three angels dressed in white and gold, which, along with their wings, indicates that they are heavenly beings. The three angels look lovingly at the Christ child while they play music for the sleeping pair.

The group of figures is alone in a quiet, natural setting. The Virgin Mary rests her back against a tree, and foliage in the background partly obscures a calm body of water at the upper right of the composition. We are left with the impression that these angels serenade a sleeping Virgin Mary and baby Jesus in a relaxing, calm, beautiful, earthly setting.

The Celebration and Will of Heaven

So, what does this painting suggest about the will of heaven?

First, the Virgin Mary wears white on her head and shoulders, with blue covering her body, and we see red at the hem and covering her forearms. The white on her head and shoulders suggests to me that her mind and heart must be pure. The blue on her body indicates that her virgin body, also being pure, is connected to heaven.

However, the red on her forearms suggests that her love must correspond to what she's able to sacrifice, that is, what she can give away. She holds on to Jesus now, but at some point, she is destined to let go of the one thing to which she is most attached: her son. Their positioning resembles that of the Pietà, an image in which the Virgin Mary will later hold her lifeless son.

In relation to Jesus, the Virgin Mary is turned more toward the angels, suggesting that she has directed her mind, heart, and body toward heaven. In other words, the Virgin Mary represents purity of mind, heart, and body, which, in their innocence, are connected to heaven. Her mind, heart, and body are not occupied by lust for earthly pleasure and power.

Interestingly enough, the two figures rest upon a bench made in the Greco-Roman architectural style of the Corinthian order, which would have been the last architectural order before the birth of Jesus. The city of Corinth, after which the architectural style is named, would also become a center for early Christianity. The fact that the two rest here suggests the coming change that Jesus will bring to Rome.

Jesus is painted turned toward us, and he is nude, with his hands clasped in front of his chest. This depiction suggests that he has come to earth with nothing: He is presented in his bare truth. Is this also a representation of purity—that our bare truth is separate from our earthly possessions?

But why are they asleep? The body language of the Virgin Mary and Jesus complements the serenity of the natural setting around them. Everything is depicted as serene, calm, and pure. Are the sleeping figures representative of a peaceful and quiet disposition? Are the states of purity and compassion represented by the Virgin Mary and Jesus precursors to this calm serenity?

The angels play music for them while they are asleep. Are the angels celebrating this mother and child who, in their purity, have obtained a calm and serene mind and heart? Or do they represent the will of heaven, which may truly direct our lives only when we stop forcing our own intentions upon our lives and the lives of others (a state also characterized by sleep, since in sleep we do not engage in intentional actions to secure our desires or interfere with the lives of others)? Or both?

This painting has made me consider the importance of a pure mind, body, and heart in obtaining the calm serenity celebrated by heaven. And perhaps this calm serenity is not achieved by intentional force but through sacrificing what we may think is important and instead being guided by the will of heaven. Perhaps, it's in such calm that we can hear the music of heaven and thus be guided by it.

The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart," we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.

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

WHAT GOOD IS POETRY?

'Sea Fever': Our Adventurous Call to Infinity

SEAN FITZPATRICK

There is a seasickness that is more like a spell than a sickness. It is a yearning, a calling, a burning whereby people seek to break free of the finite and sail out into the boundless by the illimitable analogy that the sea is.

That sea has beckoned land dwellers to live out their lives as tossing toys upon its heaving back—or beneath it, as the case may be. That sea, with its famous depth of majesty and mystery, is well-known by any who have crested the foamy cur-

rents or stood on a crashing shore. We are creatures of earth, but we long for the sea.

The poetry of the sea is as vast as the watery part of the world itself, and giants of this genre include Tennyson's Ulysses sailing "beyond the sunset," Wordsworth's vision of Proteus rising from the sea as he hears "old Triton blow his wreathed horn," Poe's "weary, way-worn wanderer" in "To Helen," and perhaps most famously, Coleridge's gallant crew of the living dead in the epic "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

But, when it comes to the poetic seduction and thrill of the seafarer and his one true love, John Masefield's "Sea Fever" must be a contender even against these titans and is at the very least well worth committing to memory as a fine and chipper sea shanty for the heart.

"I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song
And the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

(Left) "Ships in a Turbulent Sea," 1826, by Johannes Christiaan Schotel. Oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum.

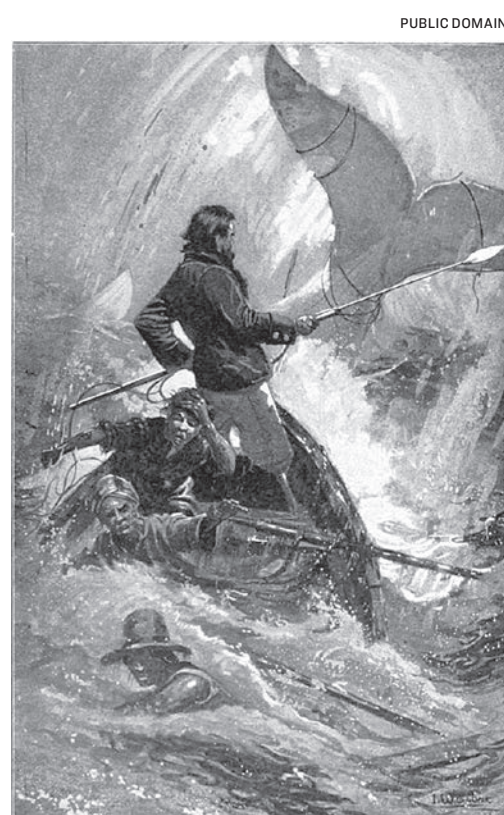
(Right) John Edward Masefield in 1916. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way
Where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over."

And so are we all urged to go down to the sea again, for one reason or another. We seek the embrace of something eternal in our smallness, our loneliness, curiosity, or wanderlust. And the sea is the living infinite, bringing the lackluster back to life, like Melville's philosopher, Ishmael, or Kipling's snob, Harvey Cheyne Jr. Both of these characters found the zest of existence in the sea and may well have spoken the words of Masefield in their feverish and fervent ardor. As Tommy Makem of the Clancy Brothers in his song "Farewell to Carlingford" phrased it, "But when the sea gets in your blood, when she calls you must obey!"

The allure of the sea is embedded in the songs, stories, and poetry of roving souls, and Masefield's clipping contribution to



The poetry of the sea is as vast as the watery part of the world itself.

(Left) Captain Ahab fighting Moby Dick, as illustrated in a 1902 edition of "Moby Dick." Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

(Right) An illustration for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Gustave Doré.

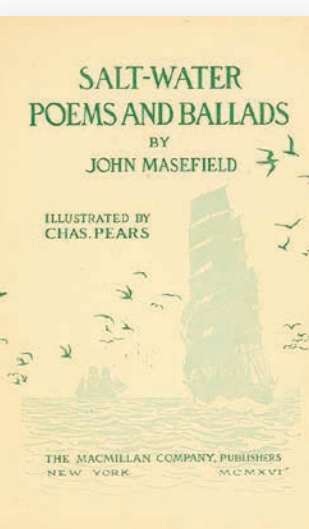
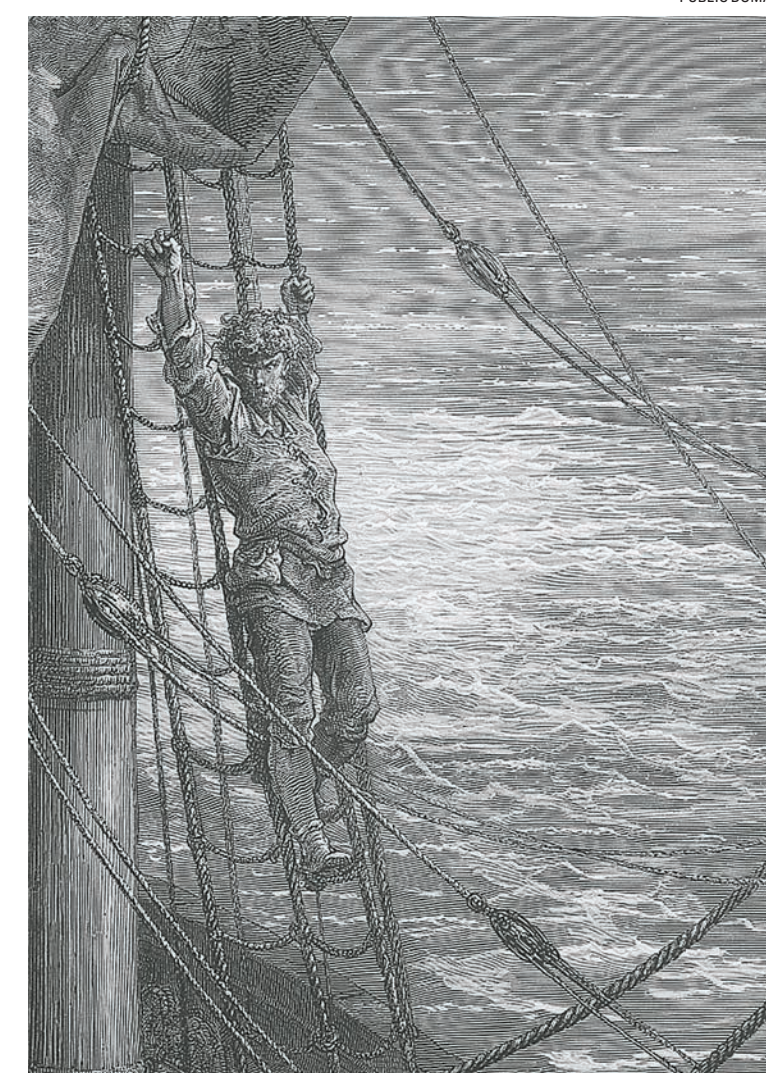
this mighty canon is particularly vivifying and liberating in its tone. "Sea Fever" smacks of the optimism and excitement of a salty wind and a fine challenge. It whistles with the air of a happy-go-lucky heart. It bears in its brief verses the appreciation of hard work, the thrill of new discovery, and the awe of creation from weather to whales.

"The deep calleth unto the deep," as the Psalmist says, and both readers and sailors suddenly comprehend a depth about themselves and the wide world in the act of encountering even the surface of those secret realms inviting exploration, promising adventure, and providing intrigue.

Again, like the experience of the sea, the experience of poems like "Sea Fever" is moving. It speaks to those who have been

in some fashion or another moved by the living beauty of the waters or terrified by the vivid brutality of the waves. The seduction of the sea woos the wildest men, and the poetry of the sea seals beyond the unfathomable depths to flood hearts with a longing for the unknown and a lunging toward adventure.

Sean Fitzpatrick serves on the faculty of Gregory the Great Academy, a boarding school in Elmhurst, Pa., where he teaches humanities. His writings on education, literature, and culture have appeared in a number of journals including Crisis Magazine, Catholic Exchange, and The Imaginative Conservative.



A first edition cover of John Masefield's book of sea poetry.

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POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Prison Drama With Hope

MICHAEL CLARK

Like a handful of classics that came before this film—"The Wizard of Oz," "It's a Wonderful Life," "Citizen Kane," "Vertigo"—"The Shawshank Redemption" was a box office failure upon initial release. Yet, for the better part of the last 25 years, it's been ranked No. 1 on the imdb.com Top 250 list and is on many critics' all-time Top 10 lists. In the interest of full disclosure, it's No. 6 on my all-time Top 10.

In retrospect, the odds were stacked against the movie before it even left the gate. The title is clunky and offers no insight into the story. The story itself isn't what most people consider to be appealing. Although leads Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman were well-known to audiences, neither was (at the time) considered a guaranteed draw. The long running time, near-absence of female characters, and lack of action certainly didn't help, and few audiences had ever heard of first-time director Frank Darabont.

Frequently compared to "Cool Hand Luke" (1967) and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975), "The Shawshank Redemption" at its core is a story about resisting, yet perhaps not quite vanquishing, an oppressive authoritarian monolith. While the two leads in the previous films were clearly guilty of crimes to which they readily admit, former banker Andy Dufresne (Robbins) steadfastly claims that he did not murder his unnamed wife and her golf-pro lover.

Pretty True to Stephen King's Source Novella

Andy arrives at Maine's Shawshank prison in the late 1940s. Red (Freeman), a convicted murderer and procurer of outside contraband, sizes him up and doesn't think much of him. He bets his small circle of inmate friends that Andy will crack under pressure his first night. This doesn't happen, and the two men slowly develop a bond that lasts decades.



COLUMBIA PICTURES

Tim Robbins (L) and Morgan Freeman play characters who become friends in a dark and hopeless prison.

In adapting the Stephen King novella "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption," Darabont doesn't stray far from the source material, except to change the fates of three supporting characters. This significantly alters the tone of the narrative. The stakes become much higher, the viewer's emotional investment richer, and the individual outcomes far more throttling and visceral.

What Darabont wisely didn't alter was the narration from Red. Through him, viewers meet secondary and peripheral characters which, in a traditional format, would have taken dog years to address. Unlike in print, in the wrong hands film narration can come off as fussy, over-indulgent, and intrusive. Freeman's honey-drenched, voice-of-God baritone becomes a soothing balm. The commentary becomes a spiritual ointment that doesn't replace live action but rather augments and deeply enhances it.

The leisurely pace of the film, especially in the second act, is thoroughly fitting for a character-driven prison drama spanning nearly three decades. This does and will strike some viewers as tedious, which might have been part of King's and Darabont's ultimate intent. The drudgery of a monotonous daily routine takes place within the confines of a

'The Shawshank Redemption'

Director
Frank Darabont

Starring
Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Bob Gunton, Clancy Brown, James Whitmore, Gil Bellows

Running Time
2 hours, 22 minutes

Rated
R

Release Date
Sept. 23, 1994

★★★★★

facility designed to crush the soul and remove all glimmer of hope under the guise of rehabilitation and is not meant to be experienced at a quick clip.

This deliberate approach to storytelling rewards patient audiences. In scene after scene, Darabont leads us down one path only to switch gears and deliver the unexpected. We're reasonably sure the story is headed to a cathartic conclusion. We want the story to live up to the last word in the title, but it's never made clear or spoon-fed.

Through hindsight and repeated viewings, audiences will appreciate the care and thoughtfulness Darabont poured into the screenplay. Foreshadowing, abundant clues, and towering character arcs all contribute to the methodical mission of Andy Dufresne. Beginning as a babe in the woods, Andy becomes an involuntary leader, a father figure, and even an ally of sorts to his demonic oppressors. He's a steadfast humanitarian in a place where humanity barely exists.

The only times when Andy and Red lock horns are when the former discusses the need to keep up hope. Andy maintains it's the only thing that can't be taken away, while Red argues that it is dangerous as it leads to more misery and unfulfilled pipe dreams.

Whatever the audience perceives as a lack of payoff and/or reward in the first two hours is more than compensated for in the final 20 minutes. The remaining story threads are resolved, and karma is duly administered. Darabont delivers an ending so poetic, so uplifting, and so heartwarming, it will move you to tears. Hope indeed springs eternal.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has written for over 30 local and national film industry media outlets and is ranked in the top 10 of the Atlanta media marketplace. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a regular contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles.



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