

Selected Press about Jay Scheib

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Theater

Time Out New York / Mar 25, 2009

New York's best

The best New York theater directors

1. [Jay Scheib](#)
Mixing multimedia with deadpan-cool (and very sexy) actors, Scheib is forging new ways of seeing drama.
2. [Ken Rus Schmol](#)
Schmol takes on more difficult playwrights, teasing out the ambiguity and menace in their words.
3. [Elizabeth LeCompte](#)
As chief engineer of the Wooster Group's postmodern tech spectacles, she has influenced a generation of experimenters.
4. [Anne Kauffman](#)
She helmed two of our favorite shows in years: *The Thugs* and *God's Ear*. Sensitive to thorny language, she makes the murky crystal clear.
5. [Joe Mantello](#)
Sure, he helmed the blockbuster *Wicked*, but the former actor is most at home working on tough drama on an intimate level.
6. [Richard Foreman](#)
They don't call him the king of the avant-garde for nothing; Foreman is the auteur's auteur: He writes, designs, directs and even operates the sound.
7. [Robert Woodruff](#)
It's criminal how little he works in the city, but when he does, we're transfixed by the elegant brutality of his cool tableaux.
8. [Stephen Daldry](#)
Without this bold British director (of stage and screen), *Billy Elliot* wouldn't have been nearly so magical.
9. [Julie Taymor](#)
We're waiting for a follow-up as impressive as *The Lion King*, but until then, we'll still get weepy over "Circle of Life."
10. [Bartlett Sher](#)
This guy can do everything: old-fashioned musicals like *South Pacific* and great drama like *Awake and Sing!* He's a treasure.



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This Beautiful City



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Chekhov 101



JAY SCHEIB in his MIT studio. His multimedia work "BELLONA, DESTROYER OF CITIES," based on the novel "Dhalgren," is part of the Emerging America festival. Photo credit: JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Taking a sci-fi tale to the stage in 'Bellona'

Laura Collins-Hughes

[The Boston Globe](#)

May 13, 2011 ET

BELLONA, DESTROYER OF CITIES At: Institute of Contemporary Art, through May 15. Tickets: \$25, \$22 students. 617-478-3103, www.icaboston.org

CAMBRIDGE — The first time director Jay Scheib read "Dhalgren," Samuel R. Delany's cult-classic science fiction novel, it took him nearly a year. The dense and looping text sprawls to almost 900 pages in the original edition, but length was not the obstacle. The speed bump he kept hitting was something he had thrown in his own path: the decision, made before he had ever finished the book, that he would adapt it into a theater piece.

"This is maybe a terrible admission, but it's sort of how I read a lot of things — because you read it very differently when what you're planning to do is to engage with the material," Scheib, a boyish 41, said on a recent afternoon in his studio at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is an associate professor of theater.

Finally, Scheib skipped to the last chapter — "which kind of blew my mind," he said. It also explained to him much that he hadn't grasped about Delany's 1975 novel, set in a post-cataclysmic urban landscape once inhabited by millions, now peopled by only a few thousand stragglers. Bellona is the name of the American city in "Dhalgren"; it is also the name of the Roman goddess of war.

“Bellona, Destroyer of Cities,” the theater piece Scheib made from the book, opens tonight at the Institute of Contemporary Art, part of the weekend-long Emerging America festival. A highly physical, multimedia production, it embraces the issues of race and sexuality that fuel Delany’s labyrinthine narrative. “It’s rated R,” Scheib said.

“Bellona,” which premiered a year ago at the Kitchen in New York, is the second work in a science fiction trilogy Scheib is developing. He has had the cooperation of Delany, the 69-year-old “Dhalgren” author, throughout the creation of “Bellona.”

“The fundamental dramatic structure of ‘Dhalgren’ is to take ordinary society and then remove a large chunk of it and see what is left,” Delany explained by phone from New York. “Money is one of the things that is removed in ‘Dhalgren,’ and a certain kind of social ability to enforce social laws is also removed. What will happen?”

“The quick assumption many people have is that we’ll, you know, devolve into chaos. Well, I think that takes a little bit of time, and I think people bring their expectations of what life should be like even into a situation like that.”

For Delany, who has already seen “Dhalgren” adapted into an opera, allowing Scheib to make theater from it was partly a matter of aesthetic curiosity. Even so, he wants to make sure that the result is recognizable to him, that it jibes with what his 31-year-old self was trying to communicate in the novel that he spent five years writing.

Scheib is scheduled to take part in a post-show conversation tomorrow night with Delany, whom he called a very tough and very good critic. When the novelist gives him notes after a rehearsal, Scheib said, he puts 75 percent of them directly into the show — and yes, he added, that is a high proportion.

At MIT, where he made “Dhalgren” the subject of a course he taught, Scheib inhabits a studio that was once a squash court. Its high wooden walls are covered with photographs and blueprints from theater and opera productions he has made in this country and in Europe.

Video cameras and monitors are scattered throughout the space, the tools of a director whose work borrows from an array of disciplines and typically combines live action with video. Scheib’s “This Place Is a Desert,” seen at the ICA in 2007, was one such excursion.

“I keep threatening, like, oh, ‘The next couple things that I do will have no media whatsoever: no sound, one light cue.’ ” said Scheib, who last month won a Guggenheim Fellowship that is meant to support the completion of his trilogy.

But listen to him talk about people’s diminishing attention spans — he prefers to think of them as faster attention spans — or about the usefulness of video in the context of black-box theater architecture, and the absence of cameras onstage seems like an empty threat for the moment. “For me, a video frame is essentially just another proscenium,” he said. “It’s a way of getting a hold once again of the visual aspect of performance, in a way which makes use of a vocabulary which culturally we know so well.” Using that technology in “Bellona,” Scheib lends a new, 21st-century form to “Dhalgren,” a work that its author described as “very much a novel of the 1970s.” “As many people have said, there’s nothing that dates faster than science fiction,” Delany said. “And the fact that ‘Dhalgren’ has actually managed to intrigue people for this long I think makes me a very, very lucky writer.” That it has not dated, Scheib said, is because the questions it raises about race and sexuality are still with us. “I think this novel should be no longer politically relevant, but it is,” he said. “It could’ve been written this morning.”

Laura Collins-Hughes can be reached at lcollins-hughes@globe.com.

March 24-30, 2010

THEATER

TWO MOONS, LOTS A BEER

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI | JAY SCHEIB ADAPTS SAMUEL R. DELANY'S EPIC SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSIC *DHALGREN*



Group sex plus civic catastrophe: *Bellona's* Scheib

In *Bellona*, a city somewhere in the Midwest, a disaster has occurred. The few citizens remaining negotiate an urban space in which scientific rationalism and civilized conduct no longer apply. A red sun haunts the sky by day; two moons hover

in the night. Buildings burn but are not consumed. The geography of streets alters. Time twists. Disorder reigns. And director Jay Scheib has the privilege of translating all this chaos onto the stage. "It's horrifying," he says. "Really hard to do. It's just so huge."

On April 1 at the Kitchen, Scheib will debut *Bellona: Destroyer of Cities*, described as "part dance, part live cinema, part theater, part urban simulation for disappearing cities." He has derived the piece from *Dhalgren*, Samuel R. Delany's sprawling, cyberpunk

meditation on sexuality, race, and catastrophe. While some sci-fi luminaries (Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison among them) have termed the 1975 book unreadable, it has sold more than a million copies and attained the status of a genre classic.

After a day of rehearsal at the Performing Garage, Scheib reflects on what drew him to *Dhalgren*. Though its nearly 900 nonlinear pages do not readily suggest theatrical adaptation, he wanted to make a play of the novel even before he'd read half of it. He found himself attracted to the imagery of a damaged city and the troubling timeliness of Delany's concerns. "We're trying to tackle a piece that looks very unapologetically at race and gender in America in the '70s," says Scheib, "but it reads like it was written this morning. We're grappling with that."

Happily, Delany, who attended an early workshop of *Bellona*, approves of Scheib's adaptation. "It's quite wonderful to have your work interpreted by artists of such energy and vision—not to mention such theatrical intelligence," he wrote the *Voice* in an e-mail. Despite this authorial endorsement, Scheib and his cast (most of whom have read *Dhalgren* at least twice) have plenty to wrestle with. They need to animate an abstruse and disjunctive text, which includes several troubling passages that verge on the pornographic. During rehearsal, they had practiced a sequence involving group sex and scandalous language. Shirts were doffed, belts were loosened, a mattress's springs were strained, and Scheib was moved to answer questions such as, "Do I do that before or after I say, 'Smell my dick?'"

Bellona marks Scheib's second attempt to stage sci-fi. It follows *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)* in a venture he's named "Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems." Drawing on his fascination with technology and the resources that an associate professorship in directing at MIT permits him, the project weds theater and science. *Untitled Mars* employed research into aerospace and astronautics; *Bellona* will refer to civil engineering and urban planning. Though he has not yet discovered how to integrate those disciplines into this production, Scheib hopes they will provide insight into how *Bellona* functions. "It has been more or less forgotten and abandoned by the world outside it," he explains, "but nonetheless, it is an ongoing system. No one knows where the food comes from, why there's always beer. It's like a strange social experiment."

The showing at the Kitchen may simply mark the first iteration of this "strange, social experiment." Scheib has fantasies of producing the play in a specific site over the course of several days. "The way to do this project is to actually do it in a neighborhood," he muses. "The audience would have to travel around and live more or less by the rules or lack thereof." His desire to achieve a more naturalistic setting for the piece speaks to the competing impulses that animate his work—science fiction on the one hand, theatrical realities on the other. As to how the two will align in this project, Scheib admits, "I'm very, very scared."

'BELLONA: DESTROYER OF CITIES'
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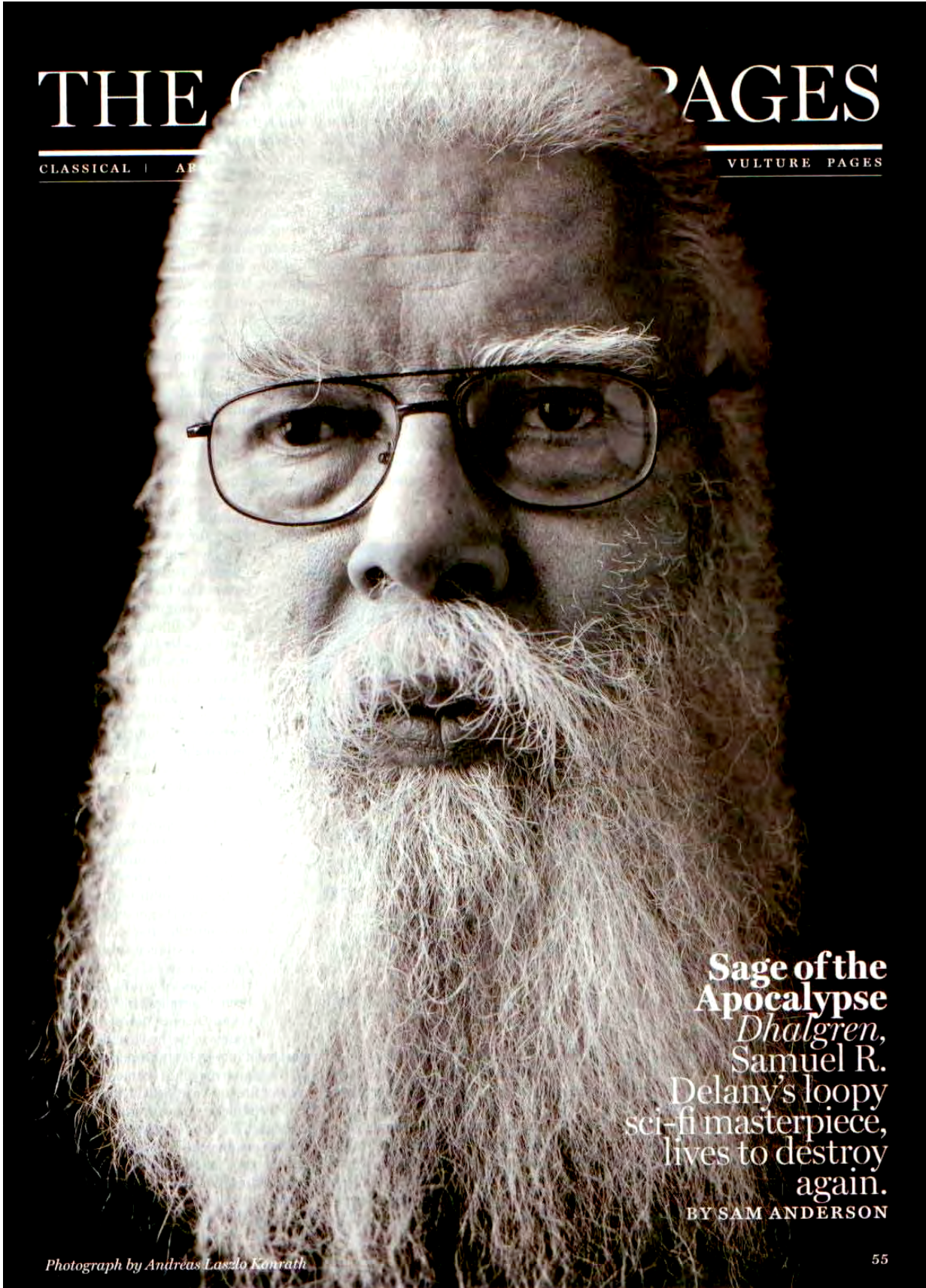
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**Sage of the
Apocalypse**
Dhalgren,
Samuel R.
Delany's loopy
sci-fi masterpiece,
lives to destroy
again.
BY SAM ANDERSON

Photograph by *Andreas Laszlo Kanrath*

55

NEW YORK

April 5, 2010

SAMUEL R. DELANY'S *Dhalgren* is—like *Moby-Dick*, *Naked Lunch*, or “Chocolate Rain”—an essential monument both to, and of, American craziness. It doesn't just document our craziness, it documents our craziness crazily: 800 epic pages of gorgeous, profound, clumsy, rambling, violent, randy, visionary, goofy, postapocalyptic sci-fi prose poetry. The book is set in Bellona, a middle-American city struggling in the aftermath of an unspecified cataclysm. Phones and TVs are out; electricity is spotty; money is obsolete. Riots and fires have cut the population down to a thousand. Gangsters roam the streets hidden inside menacing holograms of dragons and griffins and giant praying mantises. The paper arrives every morning bearing arbitrary dates: 1837, 1984, 2022. Buildings burn, then repair themselves, then burn again. The smoke clears, occasionally, to reveal celestial impossibilities: two moons, a giant swollen sun. To top it off, this craziness trickles down to us through the consciousness of a character who is, himself, very likely crazy: a disoriented outsider who arrives in Bellona with no memory of his name, wearing only one sandal, and who proceeds to spend most of his time either having graphic sex with fellow refugees or writing inscrutable poems in a notebook—a notebook that also happens to contain actual passages of *Dhalgren* itself. The book forms a *Finnegans Wake*-style loop—its opening and closing sentences feed into one another—so the whole thing just keeps going and going forever. It's like *Gertrude Stein: Beyond Thunderdome*. It seems to have been written by an insane person in a tantric blurt of automatic writing.

When I mention this to Delany, he is pleased. It is, he says, exactly the effect he was going for. And yet, he tells me, the actual writing process was deliberate and precise. “I wrote out hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of sentences at the top of notebook pages,” he remembers. “Then I would work my way down the page, revising the sentence, again and again. When I got to the bottom I'd copy the sentence out to see if I wanted it. Then I'd put them back together again. It was a very long, slow process.” It took him five years—not long by epic-novel standards, but a lifetime for an author who once wrote a book in

eleven days to fund a trip to Europe.

In the 35 years since its publication, *Dhalgren* has been adored and reviled with roughly equal vigor. It has been cited as the downfall of science fiction (Philip K. Dick once called it “the worst trash I've ever read”), turned into a rock opera, dropped by its publisher, and reissued by others. These days, it seems to have settled into the groove of a cult classic. In a foreword in the current edition, William Gibson describes the book as “a literary singularity” and Delany as “the most remarkable prose stylist to have emerged from the culture of American science fiction.” Jonathan Lethem called it “the secret masterpiece, the city-book-labyrinth that has swallowed astonished readers alive.”

Delany, meanwhile, with his restless mind and his giant white cyberpunk-Santa beard, has become a science-fiction icon—a grandfatherly figure without any visible grandfatherly tendencies. He first emerged as a prodigy in the sixties, one of a loose band of young writers sometimes referred

combine: He was pulpy, literary, lusty, academic, prolific, and meticulous. He was also, in a genre dominated by white guys writing heteronormative fantasies, African-American and openly gay. “From 1968 on,” he once told an interviewer, “I was pretty much *the* black gay SF writer.” (He was also married, for years, to lesbian poet Marilyn Hacker; they have a daughter.) Delany is a living refutation of the fixity of genre and identity boundaries. He has written memoir, film, historical fiction, pornography, theater, Wonder Woman comics, literary theory, and urban history—his *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* is a classic account of what New York lost when it turned midtown into a shopping mall.

Among all of Delany's many projects, *Dhalgren* is still his best known. At its core, it's a meditation on the nature of cities: how they live and die, cohere and fracture, nurture and consume their citizens. Delany grew up in Harlem, where his father was a successful undertaker. He started writing

Dhalgren in the East Village and finished it in London, stopping along the way in a smorgasbord of major and minor cities: New Orleans, Toronto, Seattle, Vancouver, East Lansing, and Middletown, among others. The result is a stew of different urban vibes. Not long after *Dhalgren* was published, someone wrote Delany a letter saying it seemed to have drawn its exteriors from New York and its interiors from San Francisco. “I thought that was a remarkably astute observation,” he says. “This was a woman who lived in Indianapolis.”



“Dhalgren is like Gertrude Stein: Beyond Thunderdome. It seems to have been written in a tantric blurt of automatic writing.”

Above, Jay Scheib's Bellona, Destroyer of Cities.

to as sci-fi's “new wave,” whose work helped to push the tradition away from robots and spaceships toward deep questions about race, sexuality, and identity. His characters had explicit sex but also gave each other lectures on metalogic. By his mid-twenties, Delany had written a career's worth of novels and won a career's worth of major awards. He managed to fuse, unapologetically, qualities that few had ever thought to

IT SEEMS appropriate that *Dhalgren*, or at least the latest mutation of it, will return this month to the city of its birth. On April 1—Delany's 68th birthday—the Kitchen will begin staging an adaptation called *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*. Its director and writer is Jay Scheib, an MIT professor and rising theater-world star who's been obsessed with *Dhalgren* for years. He once devoted an MIT course to the book, and has even adapted it into a play in German.

“It took me roughly a year to read *Dhalgren* for the first time,” Scheib says. “I would read the same ten pages over and over and over again.” The loop structure impelled him to keep coming back. “You get the feeling that the story has been going on like a fugue for millennia,” he says. “The second time you read it, it's thrilling. The third time, it makes you high. After that it's like reading philoso-

DHALGREN
BY SAMUEL R.
DELANY
VINTAGE BOOKS
\$18.95

**BELLONA,
DESTROYER OF
CITIES**
THE KITCHEN
APRIL 1-10

NEW YORK

April 5, 2010

phy." The play's producer, Tanya Selvaratnam, took the opposite approach, reading the entire book in a day and a half; by the end, she says, she felt like she was hallucinating. One of the actors told Scheib that reading the novel was the hardest thing he did all year. (Delany hasn't read the book in probably fifteen years and has little interest in doing so; his energy is focused on "futzing" with his next novel, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, due in November.)

The notion of turning *Dhalgren*—this disorienting vortex of pure textuality—into a functional play seems, at first, like some kind of literary joke, the equivalent of turning the Tao Te Ching into a murder mystery. Scheib concedes that the task occasionally feels impossible. For the Kitchen show, however, he's come up with a handful of innovative solutions. He describes the set as "buildings and rooms inside of buildings and rooms," portions of which will be hidden from parts of the audience. Live cameras will provide glimpses into areas that can't be seen directly, mimicking the novel's shifting perspectives and layers of mediation. The way the actors move is designed to evoke *Dhalgren's* strange prose rhythms. "We've tried to find a physically charged syntax that would stand up to the images and actions of the novel," Scheib says. "We move through dance and extreme physical actions. Things that aspire to be a kind of poetry in space."

The surprising thing is that it all seems to be working. When I sit in on a rehearsal, the feel of the novel is unmistakably present: the openness, the casual strangeness, the charmingly aggressive discomfort. Delany, who also sat in on a read-through, agrees. "All too often," he says, "when creative people pick out someone else's creative work as an inspiration, what they end up with is very, very far from the original. I was prepared for that. But this felt *familiar* to me."

The Kitchen adaptation aims to be the next cycle of *Dhalgren*: It begins where the novel ends, with a new character—a woman instead of a man—entering Bellona. "In the novel," Scheib says, "when the narrator shows up, he has sex with a woman who turns into a tree. And then he has sex with a guy, and then with a girl. Then another guy. Then a guy and a girl. So we try to keep that spirit alive." Scheib points out that, 35 years later, *Dhalgren* remains improbably contemporary. "We still battle with race and identity and sexuality," he says. "In the world of Bellona, people seem to have made peace with a lot of that stuff. There's a different attitude: They talk openly about their problems and wear their prejudices on their sleeve, and it's somehow okay. Difference produces meaning in a way that it doesn't sometimes in life." Which is almost as bizarre, in its way, as a pair of moons in the sky. ■

21•C

THE FUTURE IS HERE

21•C Editorial

21•C Recommendations

21•C 2010

Ben Marcus: A Rotten, Filthy Heart
 Jack O'Connell: Epidemic & Hammerhead
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 Blake Butler: Blood Promise
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 Dhalgren: The City That Never Sleeps

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 Jani Sirekian: Secret Writing
 Mark Dery: Medium Rare
 Mark Dery: Soft Machines For Living
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 Necromancer: The Database of the Dead
 Darren Tofts: The Infinite Library
 Mark Dery on Wild Nature
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 Timothy Leary: Is The Party Over?
 Surface City: Acker on Gibson
 Mark Dery: Industrial Memory
 R.U. Sirius: The Tyranny of Hip

Dhalgren: The City That Never Sleeps

Samuel R. Delaney's *Dhalgren* as both book and theatre.

by Ashley Crawford, June 9, 2010



Still from Jay Scheib's *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*. Image Source: JayScheib.com

Dhalgren is one of the monoliths of 20th Century literature and Samuel R. Delany (known as Chip to his mates) is one of the demi-Gods of science fiction, standing alongside Ballard, Burroughs and Dick as one of the true innovators of speculative fiction. Blurbing the 2001 edition of this 1974 epic, Jonathan Lethem stated that: "*Dhalgren's* the secret masterpiece, the city-book labyrinth that has swallowed astonished readers alive for almost 30 years. It's beauty and force still seem to be growing."

William Gibson, in his introduction to the same edition, described *Dhalgren* as "a prose-city, a vast construct the reader learns to enter by any one of a multiplicity of doors. Once established in memory, it comes to have the feel of a climate, a season. It turns there, on the mind's horizon, exerting its own peculiar gravity, a tidal force urging the reader's re-entry. It is a literary singularity. It is a work of sustained conceptual daring, executed by the most remarkable prose stylist to have emerged from the culture of American science fiction."

One can see hints of *Dhalgren's* post-apocalyptic city of Bellona, with its dark, noir-ish shadows and rusting girders, in Gibson's *Virtual Light*, in Lethem's *Chronic City*, in Steve Erickson's Los Angeles in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* and in Jack O'Connell's city of Quinsigamond. Indeed in a recent 21•C interview with O'Connell he states: "I know the moment I first heard of the book: I can recall standing at a summer party, entranced as a well-read, likeminded pal told me of this 800-page epic that was a complete head trip. I recall this friend telling me about the book suddenly splitting into two columns of type. I bought it immediately – still have that original Bantam paperback edition with that wonderful cover art of the ruined city. As I wrote a couple of years ago in an e-mail to Delany: there's a chance I may be the only person to have read large chunks of the novel in the middle of the Peruvian jungle, on a stalled train, while people painted entirely blue tried to hand steamed ears of corn to me through the windows... So, yes, *Dhalgren* has been an influence."

Delany's adventurous spirit with typography can also, no doubt, be seen in works by Erickson, David Foster Wallace and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

And then, in 2010, a man of either questionable sanity or immense courage, Jay Scheib, attempted to bring this tome of experimental literature to the stage and, astonishingly, succeeded. The 100-minute production, *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*, debuted at The Kitchen in New York.

The *New York Times* reviewer noted that: "[set designer] Peter Ksander has constructed a vertical, multi-chambered complex (an apartment building? a city? a mind?), creating a sense of ruined lives stacked one on top of the next. 'It's like a chessboard,' as one resident says, and it's hard to tell who's winning or what the stakes might be. The structure's dingy architecture alternately frames and conceals its feral inhabitants' erotic, violent actions, which swirl around an enigmatic newcomer, Kid (the marvelous Sarita Choudhury).... what an engrossing world Mr. Scheib and his fine ensemble have created. Tanya Selvaratnam's elegantly mad housewife is a subversive delight, seeming sometimes to belong to another play entirely, and Mikéah Ernest Jennings's navigation of racial stereotypes is slyly sophisticated."

New York Time Out described *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities* as "a passport to a thoroughly convincing alternate world – one that

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Jay, what in the world gave you the courage to attempt to visualize the world of Bellona?

Jay Sheib: Leap first, look later.

The visual experience is a rich one and really what hooked me – that along with the poetry and especially the poetry that left image behind, or scrambled image such that its visual aspect was no longer relevant.

My first impulse was to make a perfect 1:1 simulation of the novel. I proposed a production that would last for six or seven days and would actually transform a real neighborhood into my own vision of *Bellona* –complete with a Teddy's bar, a convenience store that would restock itself nightly, buildings and streets that would rearrange themselves, astronauts giving talks about space travel would show up with slide-shows. The price of a ticket would of course include a hotel room, and the audience would have to go on runs to get something to eat. Audience members needing jobs could move furniture for Mrs. Richards, or dig holes in the park. We had imagined doing it in a neighborhood in downtown Detroit, but actually any city would do. What can I say, it is forever difficult to know what you are getting yourself into until well after you are well into it.

We ended up in a theater. And ended up compressing this gigantic vision into a small room. But living inside of the material of *Dhalgren* – even in a smaller room never disappointed.

I set out to make a performance that would be inspired by *Dhalgren*, but which would be primarily about urban planning and design. I had envisioned it as something of a science vs. fiction foray into the evolution of conceptual civil engineering. Of course I ended up somewhere else entirely – I ended up with a play that was much more about people than about buildings.

We will be presenting the work again in a year at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston. It's an unusual theater which looks out on Boston harbour, presenting a whole range of compositional challenges and unusual possibilities. The clock is ticking and I am working with two engineers at MIT to solve some pretty steep engineering problems (i.e., the scorpion shields, a building that could burn and then suddenly not have burned, orchids, etc.).

The next iteration of the work will be something of an extension of what we have learned, but it is also possible that it will be a completely different experience, and look like a completely different production. A year is a long time. Hard to know who I will be in a year.

What did you think, Chip? Did he pull it off?

CHIP DELANY: That kind of monumental theater that Jay is describing can be really interesting. I remember, more than a decade ago, an evening-long piece called *Tamara*, which was about Mussolini's house arrest of the great Italian poet, Gabriel D'Annunzio. It was an epic with 30 odd actors and characters that took over the whole of the Park Avenue Armory and was performed upstairs on the second floor, on the ground floor, and in the basement, and the audience had an elaborate buffet dinner in the midst of it. Through the evening, the audience went from room to room, and you could only follow one story line a night. I went back to see it five times. Quickly that approach devolved into comedy, however, with *Tina and Tony's Wedding*, which used the same idea – an actual dinner as part of the show – for farce. It had a few giggles, but no real theatrical weight.

I'm actually rather glad things got down to reasonable proportions by the time you mounted *Bellona*. If somebody is going to mount a creative piece that takes off from another creative piece, which is what Jay and Tanya have done, if you have any sense you don't expect certain things to happen. You don't look for that exact 1:1 photographic reproduction, faithful in every detail, of the inspiring piece. *Dhalgren* is a near 900 page novel. The show is an hour, an hour and a half. I talked to a few people afterward, who hadn't seen it, and the first thing they asked was: "Hey, how did they do the Scorpions?" And I said, "Basically, they left them out."

They looked crestfallen: for them the scorpions were their favorite part of the book. But *Bellona* is a piece of live theater, and a proscenium theater at that, not a multi-million dollar CGI film. Within those confines, Jay, Tanya, and the other actors mounted a really interesting evening. My sense was very much that most of the audience felt much as I did. So, yes, they pulled it off, swimmingly if your expectations are organized around reasonable parameters.

I was a bit surprised, nay, stunned, Jay, to see that the Kid had a sex change. Was that your idea or Samuel's? That would seem to cut into the homoerotic edge of Dhalgren somewhat – was that a concern?

JS: In my first outing with the material, at the Mozarteum in Austria, the role of Kid was played by a guy and the sexuality played out much as in the novel. When we started in New York we began, again, with the same setup. Kid was played as a guy. But in the beginning of that rehearsal period we made a lot of compositional improvisations and my continued work on the material moved our thinking in a different direction.

So, the decision was 50 per cent about having loved what Sarita Choudhury was doing with the character during our rehearsals and 50 per cent about what happens in the last three pages of the book. For me, the feeling of arriving at the last three pages is so deeply moving, and sort of heartbreaking in a nausea-inspiring, multiplicity-of-perspective kind of way.

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having written it? Then she would take up writing herself and it would just go on like that.

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities then is more like another round of *Dhalgren* – a repetition (increasingly frayed), but with only the vaguest memory of having already lived through the very disaster that they all somehow suspect is about to happen again.

I don't know that anybody would necessarily need to understand our logic in order to understand or enjoy, be inspired by or just be engaged in what we ended up making.

What was it like seeing your characters 'in the flesh' as it were? Did it affect your own vision of the key figures and the city itself?

SRD: Well, this isn't the first time *Dhalgren* has made it to another medium. In the mid-'80s, maybe 25 years ago, a Los Angeles composer, Quentin Llorentes, wrote a rock opera based on *Dhalgren*. It had an L.A. run about the length of Jay and Tanya's show here in New York at the Kitchen. I wasn't able to get out to the coast to see it. But Llorentes sent me some very nice tapes – it was a very ambitious work. It was also quite beautiful. Listening to it for the first time was an experience – indeed, it was the experience that kind of rearranged the inside of my head and made me look at my own work differently. Probably that's because it was first: I was a lot younger; and more closely connected in time to the creation of the book – far more in touch with the young man who had written it. Before I packed them away with my stored papers, I had a stack of various quality film script adaptations of the novel that people have sent me over the years – some of them good, and, yes, some pathetic.

So the simple answer to your question is, no; it didn't affect my vision too much. Science fiction fans are extremely committed to their chosen field of writing. Back in '78 or '79, I went to a Balticon – a science fiction convention in Baltimore, Maryland – and the first evening, as I was walking down the 10th-floor hotel hall, I looked up, and from around the corner, came a some dozen or dozen-and-a-half young people, black, white, Asian, female and male, in black leather, vests and pants, boots and wrist braces, with loops of chain around their necks. The local science fiction club had decided to come to the convention dressed as a nest of Scorpions. Visually, they were a pretty impressive bunch, and I was really disoriented for a few seconds, to see something I had imagined in a story become real and corporeal. When they recognized me, they began to laugh – and, in a moment, I was laughing too.

But this wasn't in a theater.

This was in a Baltimore 10th-floor hotel corridor. I believe we all ended up at a party together. They were interesting kids, and we had some interesting conversations.

Perhaps I'm being unfair. You're asking about my innate emotional reaction to the piece Jay and Tanya put on, on the deepest level. And the truth is, on that level I didn't have one. I enjoyed what they did. I was complimented by their expenditure of energy and intelligence. I could honestly tell anyone who asked me that it was an interesting evening in the theater, and two weeks of sold-out performances, pretty much bare that out.

But, at the level you're interrogating, that had happened when I wrote the book itself, with a little bit left over, in the years immediately following.

Any artist should be pleased, honored, and grateful for intelligent attention, and those are my feelings toward Jay and Tanya and the incredible actors they marshaled for their play – as I am to you for your interest, and the fact that it's intense enough to manifest itself in these questions.

Jay, when did you first encounter Dhalgren?

JS: About five years ago I met a visual artist named Anne Lislegaard, who was preparing a work based on the novel and she said I should read it. It took me a year or so to get through it the first time, and about two days to get through it the second time. I had never heard of it, somehow I had missed out. I keep meeting people, like you, who read it when they were 14 or so. That's crazy. Of course they all share this strange hyper-intelligence. So I think I'm going to give it to my nephew when he turns 14. I wish I had read it then.

You've made strong use of cinematography and music in your version – does this pre-empt a possible attempt to bring it to the big screen?

JS: No, not really. I've thought very little about it. I use cameras in the same way that most people use microphones – to see closer, louder, to see around corners, etc. It is used principally as a way of making visible the details of expression that would otherwise have been too soft, too subtle, too far away to be properly communicative. I don't think much about making movies. I'm pretty busy making live events. I would consider it. Maybe television (the small screen). Maybe as a series. Either way, if I made a film version of this novel I would want to make the whole thing. That would require something on the order of 24 hours? I'll ask around and see who might be interested in getting involved... It would be interesting to me. My next science fiction endeavor has something to do with television.

What do you think? Would it make a movie? Who would play the Kid?

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doesn't need any sort of popular validation other than the million or so readers it seems to have corralled into reading it, many of them, like you, willing to read through it several times.

Dhalgren is a written text.

The things it does, the contradiction its dramatizes, can only exist on paper – can only have the effect they have on paper. Or, at any rate, that's really all I was interested in. The rest is aesthetic games for others, that I certainly don't begrudge them; but those are still secondary as far as I'm concerned.

A question like that is for the person who directs the movie to decide. The question holds no interest for me, and pretending that it did, however regular a guy it might make me sound like, would be silly.

The apocalypse seems to be very much on the cultural/literary agenda at present (I'm thinking of younger writers such as Ben Marcus and Brian Evenson, but also Cormac McCarthy's The Road). Why do you think that is?

SRD: Apocalyptic stories have been popular with people ever since John sat down on the rocks and began scribbling at Patmos. I don't think we have any more than anyone else.

We have no control over our own birth – and frighteningly little over our death. So people are always going back to tales of origins and endings.

I'm very fond of – and, hell, impressed with – Evenson's work. It's emotionally daring in a way I can recognize and appreciate. And Marcus certainly tries for an interesting level of inventiveness. To me, Cormac McCarthy seemed a lot more interesting 15 or so years ago than he does today. His theologized violence seems badly under-analyzed and far more glib than insightful.

Two of the core components of Dhalgren are the claustrophobic nature of the city of Bellona and the surrounding catastrophe – how did you go about depicting these?

JS: That's interesting; I never thought of Bellona as claustrophobic. But I guess I see your point. It's described as a city that used to have two million people living in it, but now there are only about a thousand. A big city with a lot of empty buildings. Big enough to get lost in. Big enough to have been segregation-able. So, while reading I had assumed that everyone went to Teddy's not because it was the only game in town but because it was the best place to hang out – the drinks are always on the house!

The catastrophe is the real issue. The differing opinions as to what caused the catastrophe (which seems not to have ended) are what really got my attention. Some passionately explain that an underage white girl was raped by a big black guy and the city was burned as the result of a race-fueled revenge riot. Other's make it clear that what really happened was that an important black activist was shot and the city burned in protest of that particularly tragic crime. Maybe this is how Sodom and Gomorrah burned. Not in a single flash but in one ongoing repetition like a truly sadistic vision of hell. A multiple profusion expressed in a recurring ball of fire.

I like the way in which race plays forward in Delany's novel. No official perspective circumscribes the discourse, no discourse contains the image. Characters like Kid, Tarzan, George and June, and Jack all subvert so many ideologies of *rightness*. It's contradictory, unstable, unpredictable, and reads more or less like it could have been written this morning. The novel isn't concerned with anybody's politics in general or prejudices in particular. Least of all mine. So I tried to make a play that would also not be too focused in its politics, prejudices, or ideologies, but nonetheless would allow them space to exist in relief, one against the other. Chip's comments during the rehearsal were super helpful on this front. Chip was super helpful on many fronts. But especially understanding the humour and the tender playfulness that is necessary to actually comprehend the crisis.

I put the Richards family essentially at the center. A wobbling nuclear family in the middle but ready to blow. I'm thinking about an American city. A deeply familiar image. Mrs. Richards, played by Tanya Selvaratnam, wanted to hold on to an existence that really no longer existed. Held on desperately even as the buildings and walls crumbled around her. And so the catastrophe leaks out of this enormous internal pressure. And this pressure in turn plays each member of the family into an array of *violent postures*. Their daughter, June is so pressurized that she can barely breathe and ends up running through the streets in search of something that will release the crave. She ends up pushing her brother Bobby to his death at the bottom of an elevator shaft. It's really sad what happens. It's really sad to see just how lonely this family actually is together. We made a very intense family with great physical performers like Jon Morris and Natalie Thomas playing the two kids. I really loved those scenes. Caleb Hammond played both Mr. Richards and Tak (the two engineers). And when this family explodes, it takes the whole city with it.

Dhalgren is always described as "science fiction" but, like Ballard's work, that description seems simplistic to me (not to damn SF per se). Did you ever feel it was slightly ghettoized by that description?

SRD: Well, despite your intentions, the statement damns SF nevertheless. It's got the same logical structure as: "Of course I

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aware there's nothing complimentary in the cliché you've just uttered.

Science fiction is a ghetto not because it deserves to be but because too many people judge it by its worst examples and are too lazy to hunt out its best and revise their picture accordingly.

But I don't find those genre questions overly interesting. To say anything intelligent about them, however, you have to have enough genre history under your belt at least to reach an informed level. It's like trying to talk about poetry if all you've ever read is the lyrics to a few Dylan or Beatles songs. Sure, they're good and may even be of poetic interest, but you're still a pretty limited reader.

You replaced the orchids with guns. Was that to give it a grittier, more here-and-now feel? Always loved the visceral notion of the orchids myself.

JS: No it wasn't really about timeliness or edginess or grittiness. None of that stuff really. It's a big novel with weeks or even months of action packed days and nights described. Choosing what to exclude is so difficult. The shooting of Paul Fenster, who was played by Mikeah Ernest Jennings, was so important to me. Since Paul was shot and not stabbed, I choose to make Paul's shooting into a recurring theme and so it made sense to have a gun appear from time to time. So there's a gun.

People also get beat with pipes. But I love the orchid. And I didn't mean to replace it. I just don't have it yet but I intend to get one. By May. We did actually make a few different orchids but none of them really worked. So it was a bit of a bottle-neck on the design end. It's a difficult object to engineer. In the novel I recall there were ongoing safety issue with Kid's orchid (another real reality effect/detail) so it needs to look really dangerous and be really dangerous, but actors need to be able to do things more than once.

Here's a question for both of you. Dhalgren was first published in 1974, I believe. In what ways have the cultural and societal issues within Dhalgren changed? What do you both think of America's first African American President?

JS: I don't know if I can answer this.

The novel for me is unforgettable. About time and outside of most time. I know that it's prose (not poetry), and I hope Chip will forgive my saying so, but it turns out, *Dhalgren* is most of the best poetry I've ever read...

The poetry I think rides outside of social and cultural currencies of relevance.

The social landscape that unfolds in *Dhalgren* reads to me like a future, of which we have only the vaguest memories. Things have changed of course and continue to change but so does my reading of the book. As a humanist (I am not yet really a machinist) I look forward to aspects of *Dhalgren* feeling a little more distant, a little more out of date. What I mean is that I look forward to aspects of the book feeling more like historical record than contemporary reflection. Other aspects of the book, like some of Dostoyevsky's works, will be relevant as long as there are people on the planet who can read them.

As for Obama? I have to think on this. A friend of ours, Catherine Gund told us a story about how her then four-year-old daughter, on her way to school, asked who the first black president was. It wasn't somehow thinkable to someone like Sadie to imagine that there hadn't already been an African-American President. She's part of a generation for whom America's racial divide is not the same as it was for mine and those before. It takes a four-year-old sometimes to point out some of the most obvious truths.

It's making history. Let's hope it makes memory.

SRD: I think that's the most hopeful answer I can imagine to that question. So let's end it here. Thanks very much for taking this time with Jay and me.

Special thanks to Tanya Selvaratnam Scheib and Paul D. Miller for making this interview possible.

June 2010 [Permalink](#) (27 views) Filed under [Samuel R. Delaney](#), [Ashley Crawford](#)



21•C 2010



Ben Marcus: A Rotten, Filthy Heart
Ben Marcus, Ashley Crawford



Jack O'Connell: Epidermis & Hermeneutics
Jack O'Connell, Ashley Crawford

April 8-14, 2010

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities

★★★★★

The Kitchen (see Off-Off Broadway).
By Samuel Delany. Adapted and
directed by Jay Scheib. With
ensemble cast. 1hr 40mins.
No intermission.

There are several beginnings to Jay Scheib's adaptation of Samuel Delany's 1974 cult-hit *Dhalgren*—appropriately enough, since the novel itself makes a structural fetish of beginnings. Scheib's unnerving *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities* starts with the cast—seen on a giant projection screen—bouncing noisily through an orgy. The room catches fire. Then an astronaut (Tanya Selvaratnam) wanders through the show's blackened brick arcades, stepping lightly in the smoke like she's visiting the moon. We've just met the triple godhead of postapocalyptic Bellona: Debauchery, Destruction and Displacement.

In this American wasteland, deities rule, but rules collapse. Nature, gender and morality all slip their bonds in Delany's transgressive epic, which watches as a cocky, sexually voracious naif (Sarita Choudhury) explores a gutted city, populated by homicidal gangs and violent poets. Luckily, Scheib (who went sci-fi with 2008's *Untitled Mars* as well) has his own immutable laws to ground us: his customarily elegant use of live video,



OFF THE WALL
Hammond, left,
reveals a stash of
pornographic posters.

a grimy aesthetic indebted to Cassavetes, and a sprung-rhythm acting style—embodied by the disquieting Caleb Hammond, the only actor to ever physically frighten me from the stage.

There is one nagging concern: In order to mirror the brutality of Delany's pornographic excess, Scheib unleashes dancers Natalie Thomas and Jon Morris, and here the piece paradoxically loses momentum. Even in the strongest sections, audiences must stay alert, since it requires a conscious effort to adjust to Scheib's anticathartic style. But rest assured, all that labor is a passport to a thoroughly convincing alternate world—one that seems to weirdly overlay our vision even as we stumble outside onto the suddenly unfamiliar concrete of far-west 19th Street.—*Helen Shaw*

The New York Times

April 7, 2010

THE Arts

New Kid At Large On Urban Chessboard

Adaptations are tricky monsters; where do you begin when making theater out of something like "Dhalgren," Samuel R. Delany's classic science-fiction novel

THEATER REVIEW

CLAUDIA
LA ROCCO

about the ravaged, metaphoric city of Bellona? How do you please devotees and guide the uninitiated (this reviewer is 95 percent in the uninitiated category, having just begun the book) while forging a self-sufficient artistic vision?

In "Bellona, Destroyer of Cities," the director Jay Scheib wisely starts with Mr. Delany's language, adapting his script from a collage of direct, hybrid and invented sentences and characters while steering clear of any strict re-creation of the 800-page book. This 100-minute production at the Kitchen is the second in Mr. Scheib's sci-fi trilogy, after "Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)."

That work won a 2008 Obie for scenic design, and "Bellona" might also be a contender. Peter Ksander has constructed a vertical, multichambered complex (an apartment building? a city? a mind?), creating a sense of ruined lives stacked one on top of the next. "It's like a chessboard," as one resident says, and it's hard to tell who's winning or what the stakes might be. The structure's dingy architecture al-

"Bellona, Destroyer of Cities" runs Thursday through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, www.kitchenproject.com

Yet what an engrossing observ-



JULIETA CERVANTES

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities William Nadylam and Sarita Choudhury in Jay Scheib's play at the Kitchen.

ONLINE: 'DHALGREN'

The Times's 1975 review of Samuel R. Delany's book:

nytimes.com/theater

ternately frames and conceals its feral inhabitants' erotic, violent actions, which swirl around an enigmatic newcomer, Kid (the marvelous Sarita Choudhury).

"She's brand new," an observer wryly notes. "Just came out of a wrapper." Kid has arrived in Bellona intent on becoming a poet; her words may be prophetic, or perhaps just scrambled meditations in a city equally scrambled by madness, lust and violence.

A bank of screens, with video and photography by Mr. Scheib and Carrie Mae Weems, captures

some of these hidden moments between live action and

or offers close-ups of details: fake blood bubbling from a fatal accident (which is probably a murder), a man's fist slowly clenching and releasing.

It's a potentially effective strategy; the choreographer William Forsythe used video reveals with magical results in "Kammer/Kammer." But Mr. Scheib doesn't go far enough in stymieing our view or blurring the line between live action and the more mysterious perspective offered on the monitors. Further, the camerawork's quality is uneven, so that the tension often flags between the actual and the mediated.

Similarly halfhearted are noodling bursts of movement by Natalie Thomas, a former Forsythe dancer whose derivative efforts aren't nearly strange enough.

"She's brand new," an c

as an organic part of this fractured whole; she simply looks like a dancer dropping in for a cameo.

It's a fine line between structure and mayhem that Mr. Scheib must walk throughout "Bellona." On the night I saw it, the work's pacing wasn't entirely settled, and certain cute theater touches also worked against its casting a spell.

Yet what an engrossing world Mr. Scheib and his fine ensemble have created. Tanya Selvaratnam's elegantly mad housewife is a subversive delight, seeming sometimes to belong to another play entirely, and Mikéah Ernest Jennings's navigation of racial stereotypes is slyly sophisticated.

For all its flaws, the work's ambitions hearten. "Bellona" sometimes falters. But it doesn't loos-

an apartment building, a city

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Jay Scheib's Bellona at The Kitchen

Posted on [April 3, 2010](#) by Andy

Jay Scheib's *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities* is a sensory overload of a surreal sci-fi mindfuck, a seriously epic vision of a post-apocalyptic city. It is slippy and unnerving, violently sexual, brash, troubled and troubling.

The show takes place in Bellona, which has been decimated by some disaster that no-one quite remembers, and it is now a shattered landscape of violence and mayhem. Every shifts – sexuality, race, place, politics – and the citizens have to cope with life in a lawless, upended society. The story follows two groups of people, a ragtag ever-changing band of street-type people and a four-person family living in an apartment that serves as a type of bunker against the chaos outside. The main character is Kid or Kidd – a newcomer to Bellona who can't remember her name but, determined to become a great writer, uses the chaos as inspiration for a mysterious book of poems.

In Bellona sex is violence and once-normal interactions are fraught with conflict and aggression. Scheib's staging is intensely physical with the actors throwing each other around and into the set, wreaking destruction on each other and their environs. Conversations are like interrogations and what passes for affection is akin to assault.

Several crucial scenes unfold to a thundering edit of Led Zeppelin's *When The Levee Breaks* – and it captures the mood of threat, violence and majestic destruction perfectly.

The experience of watching the show is as disorienting as life is for the characters – people come and go with little to no introduction, their names change, their identities, sexualities and genders shift. Lines are delivered like threats and accusations. These are not well-adjusted people having emotional crises, these are people who are living with their backs constantly against the wall as the world falls apart around them.

Heightening the sense of disorientation is Scheib's use of video. He is one of the few directors who really seems to know how to blend performative and cinematic vocabularies, using video cameras as tools to direct our attention to moments that might be lost, or to heighten our awareness of multiple realities or just to create a fractured sense of reality.

The show is a rough beast, indeed, and getting caught up in the maelstrom is well worth the trip. It plays at the Kitchen until April 10. It will probably sell out so get your tix ahead of time.

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities features performances by Sarita Choudhury, Caleb Hammond, Mikéah Ernest Jennings, Jon Morris, William Nadylam, Kaneza Schaal, Tanya Selvaratnam, April Sweeney, and Natalie Thomas; Scenic Design by Peter Ksander; Costume Design by Oana Botez-Ban; Sound Design by Catherine McCurry; Lighting Design by Miranda k. Hardy; Video and Photography by Carrie Mae Weems and Jay Scheib; Assistant Director: Laine Rettmer; Tour Producer: ArKtype/Thomas O.

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AN EYE ON THE FUTURE

I'VE developed most of my work outside of traditional theatre institutions, which causes me to see the future as an ongoing, disparate collection of events. My thinking about the future is really very short-term.

In the past 10 years I have tried to assemble my creative process into makeshift seasons. The first season lasted from 2003 to 2007 and was titled "The Flight Out of Naturalism." This season was comprised of about nine productions and focused dually on Naturalism and Cinema Vérité. I was interested in Reality.

My interest is now in Fiction. The upcoming season is called "Simulated Cities / Simulated Systems," and it looks like this: a trilogy of science-fiction performance works (of which part two, *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*, will be developed in Salzburg, Germany, then New York); an opera about ice in Antarctica composed by Eric Sanko (premiering in Australia); a documentary performance with Andrew Andrew (on North Korea) and another with Tanya Selvaratnam (on Sri Lanka); a play by Brecht in

We barely have a center toward which to aspire, or against which to rebel.

his hometown state-theatre in Augsburg; an evening of songs about the life and times of Peter Lorre, with the World/Inferno Friendship Society (at the Spoleto Festival, and later at the Vancouver Winter Olympics); a choreographic installation for a solo performer based on *All's Well that Ends Well*; and *Motion Studies*, an opera with composer Keeril Makan and Alarm Will Sound (to premiere in New York).

This is roughly my Future, for three years.

This Future relies on relationships with a dozen or so producers and theatres, a host of collaborators, some six or seven countries, and several institutions. In this Future, Organization is the price of Independence. I'm not sure that this is what the future should look like, but I suspect it is not so different from that devised by other independent theatre artists.

In the American theatre we are so Independent. We barely have a center toward which to aspire, or against which to rebel. But we have a Market, and we have a rich history in need of synthesis. In this Market, however, the discussion of synthesis is usually swallowed by the noise of Negotiations. Many of my friends speak with optimism about the collapse of the Market because in the silence which remains, a discussion is beginning to emerge, and it is getting louder and louder.



JAY SCHEIB, director,
writer and designer, Cambridge, Mass.,
and New York City

JAY SCHEIB

Riding a Different Circuit

The experimental director is making a name for himself outside the traditional resident theatre network



Scheib

BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

Important things to know about director Jay Scheib: Born: 1969, Shenandoah, Iowa. Occupation: associate professor in music and theatre arts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Number of productions slated for 2008: five, three of them world premieres, taking place in three countries. (“Last season, I had seven premieres in five different countries,” Scheib says evenly. He says everything evenly.) Number of resident theatre gigs this year and every year heretofore: zero.

How can such a director as Scheib—who, not so incidentally, has also written or adapted scripts for about a dozen of his own productions—earn degrees and awards from impeccably conventional bodies (B.A., University of Minnesota; MFA, Columbia University; NEA/TCG Career Development Program grant) and then go on to fashion his career entirely outside of the institutions they were intended to serve—ostensibly the center of the American theatre? The circuit he is now riding—stretching from New York City’s P.S. 122 to Minnesota’s Walker Art Center to theatres and festivals in Hungary, Austria and Germany—suggests that another center exists and that another kind of theatrical life is possible, even if it’s not quite, or not yet, a living.

“One of my goals is to pay my actors as much as they would make temping,” he says. Still, his regular actors, a group of six to eight that one might call the Jay Scheib Players, moan like addicts when they think of working with him again. “Whenever I get a call from Jay, I just stop the presses,” says New York-based performer Eric Dean Scott. He and

the rest of Team Scheib are gambling big as they develop Scheib’s exuberantly physical, heavily technologized but emotionally open style of theatremaking. Audiences and critics may love it or hate it, but they are rarely indifferent. Scheib himself cites Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, William Forsythe, Rem Koolhaas and Anne Bogart among his various inspirations

and mentors—famous names that would mean nothing if Scheib couldn’t refine those influences to give every work (whether it be a song cycle or straight play, with his own text or not, high-tech or low) a genuine sense of excitement and risk.

Let’s look at the projects. In January *This Place Is a Desert* appears at Mark Russell’s Under the Radar Festival at New York City’s Public Theater, the equivalent, for Scheib’s circuit,



April Sweeney and Thomas Keating in Scheib’s *This Place Is a Desert* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

HAYDEN TAYLOR

of the resident theatre's Humana Festival of New American Plays. *Desert* is a smashup of relationships inspired by the works of filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and Three Mile Island transcripts. Disintegrating couples video and re-video each other with multiple live feeds designed by Scheib's frequent collaborator Leah Gelpe.

In March, his as-yet-untitled Mars project premieres at P.S. 122, combining scientific fact and fiction to imagine genuine space colonization. In July, Scheib's staging of the biographical song cycle by the gypsy cabaret punk band World Inferno Friendship Society, titled *Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre's Twentieth Century*, has its European premiere at the Salzburg Sommerszene (it played this past September at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival). This coming September, not far away in Budapest, he will adapt Philip K. Dick's science fiction in a piece called *Time Again and Again*, for Pont Mühely theatre (whose actors also plan to take part in the Mars project, if funding permits). An engagement tentatively scheduled for December will bring him to Minneapolis to direct the premiere of Anthony Gatto's opera



World Inferno Friendship Society in *Addicted to Bad Ideas* at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival.

of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* at the Walker Art Center. Scheib is writing the libretto.

And that's the year. Add to that at least one student production, various readings, teaching. "For the past three years, I've been booked a year and half in advance," he says, again, evenly. "This year it's almost two."

Scheib is tall and lanky, with thick brown curly hair going gray and a square, friendly face with a point of a chin. He moves and speaks casually—at a roundtable discussion, he'd rather sprawl than sit. A former high school track-and-fielder, he can live in his body as well as his mind. (The result, perhaps, of his Midwestern farm-boy



Malaika Ledig in *Kommander Kobayashi* at Germany's Saarländisches Staatstheater.

upbringing. Actor Aimée Phelan-Deconinck remembers, “In Germany, we were outside a rehearsal space. A shirt was in a tree, very high, and he lassoed it.”

This casualness is also deceptive—or no longer the whole story. The sprawling productions of Heiner Müller and of Scheib’s own works (produced by his own theatres, the Arcade Theatre and the American Theatre Institute) that gave him outlaw cred in Minneapolis in the ’90s have been replaced, 10 years later, by shows that display a more focused mind and structured development.

WHAT REMAINS IS HIS BREADTH OF

taste. “He likes high culture, but he also likes trash,” declares German opera director Berthold Schneider of the Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken, who imported Scheib to direct episodes of the space opera *Kommander Kobayashi* after seeing his work in Berlin. “This is rare—there are few people who can contain such various visual and other impressions.” When asked why so many of his adapted works have “after” in the credits—“after Tolstoy,” or Euripides—Scheib speaks of searching for ways to make the works as surprising as they were when they were born. With Tolstoy’s play *The Power of Darkness*, which he developed with his MIT students before directing the show for Pont Mühely, he dropped characters, restored censored scenes and rewrote based on actor improvisations. The play’s rural violence resonated for Scheib. “I grew up in Iowa in the ’80s when every third farmer went bankrupt. Rather than doing the play as a museum piece, I did research to see to what extent it paid homage to its time and engaged social

issues—and then I found a way to reassess them.”

I witnessed a sample of Scheib’s approach last year, when he directed Daniel Veronese’s *Women Dreamt Horses* at the Buenos Aires in Translation festival at P.S. 122. I’d seen Veronese’s own production of his play in Argentina—a semi-realistic dinner party in cramped quarters, brimming with suppressed violence. Under Scheib’s direction, the playing space was vast and the violence was drawn to the surface, enacted with boxing, slap fights, compulsive

vomiting and semi-gymnastic stunts. Was this acting or contact improv? It played like both—and, at the first show, also a bit like porn (when they’re talking, you just want the action). But when I returned for the final show of the run, all was knit together: sensible, Argentine at the source, but American in tone and, most important, continuously

interesting. Scheib had gambled and won.

Scheib is perfectly comfortable being textually faithful to other writers’ new plays, but one thing about *Women* was atypical—its low-tech style. At the finish of *Women*, the gun-toting actor just yelled “Bang.” (By comparison, *This Place Is a Desert* has four screens with live video feed. The role of video mediation in live performance has obsessed Scheib for more than a decade.)

Listening to his players talk about how they developed *Women* reveals a lot about Scheib’s method. First of all, like his teacher Anne Bogart, Scheib treats his actors as collaborators rather than instruments. “He’s interested in people—who you are, what you bring to the process and how you and only you can bring that thing,” says another frequent actor-collaborator April Sweeney. When their extensive table work on *Women* finally ended, Scheib brought the cast to its feet with small exercises and wild-card requests—recipes for moments the actors would go off and create. “We composed a list of things to have,” says Scott, “like 30 seconds of a repetition or one moment of the smallest possible violent event.” One actor knew how to box.

They used it. Dance-trained Phelan-Deconinck can stretch her ankle above her head, casually. So they used that too.

Like the late Polish experimentalist Kantor, Scheib gives titles to different periods of his work. The past seven years, ending with *Desert*, were “The Flight out of Naturalism.” A new era, “Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems,” is being born with the Mars project.

Scheib’s research bent is supported by his current berth at MIT, which, he says, forces him to organize his thinking. “MIT is a research institution.

If my research has to do with the integration of media and live performance, or development of tech for use in live performance, or exploring other theatrical idioms, I have to theorize them and describe them in concrete ways.” He can also use student productions to begin explorations—he had his first crack at the Mars project at MIT in October, for instance. “So long as I can continue to main-



This Place Is a Desert at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art.

HAYDEN TAYLOR

tain a studio environment that I connect to teaching, then I’ll continue to be happy,” he says. “When it becomes routine, it’s time to leave—but as yet it’s never routine.”

The practical challenge for Scheib is turning his theatre life into a living. In the past year, Shoshana Polanco, who produced the Buenos Aires in Translation festival, has joined him as creative producer (a title that

suggests a formal economic relationship that they do not yet have). Her role is flexible, she says, but the management responsibilities are now hers. Financial stability is still a goal. “We fantasize about taking over one of the regional theatres,” she says, even as she admits she has no contact with them.

How long this alternative circuit can sustain them is a hanging question. “I put the work out; I write letters. Most theatres are not interested,” shrugs Scheib. Still, with the Under the Radar showcase, the

array of other projects on tap and Polanco on board—not to mention the continuing loyalty of his players—2008 (or 2009 or 2010, when his schedule opens up) could be the year love meets money. ☑

Playwright and journalist Aaron Mack Schloff writes frequently for this magazine.

Theater

Time Out New York / Issue 655 : Apr 16–22, 2008

Martian to a different drummer

Multimedia wizard Jay Scheib colonizes the Red Planet for theatrical research.

By Helen Shaw



MISSION CONTROL Scheib probes a strange planet.

Photograph: Naomi White

Deep in the belly of an abandoned vault on Wall Street, a man with a lizard tail talks softly to his foam claws as another stages an aggressive seduction in a boardroom. An almost whisper-soft suggestion—“Could you try that a little more tenderly?”—comes from the lanky director crouching at the lovers’ feet. Even though embraces in Jay Scheib’s shows usually look like wrestling holds, the note persuades actor Caleb Hammond to grip his paramour slightly less viciously—as he half-nelsons her into a revolving chair. The lizard picks up a camera.

Welcome to Mars. Or at least, welcome to a rehearsal of *Untitled Mars: This Title May Change*, a droll, discomfiting trip to the Red Planet as dreamed up by Scheib. An unlikely collision of scientific experiment and Philip K. Dick, the show takes its inspiration from one of the Mars Desert Research Stations, a deadly serious outpost where researchers wear space suits and run around the Utah desert. While the scientists simulate life on Mars, Scheib's company will simulate the scientists—though with a significantly lower budget. Set designer Peter Ksander describes the mash-up of sci-fi and reality as the new alienation effect: "Jay is using Mars in the same way that Brecht used the Thirty Years War." It's not that alien: The 38-year-old director lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and teaches at MIT, where some of his students might actually have a crack at being Mars pioneers.

As with almost all of Scheib's work, the show will be thick with video, much of it shot live in the room. He may not want to become a one-trick pony ("I have an Iphigenia coming up that has no video at all!" he assures us. "Maybe three light cues!"), but Scheib is still known for his multimedia work. Video appears in most of his shows, its function changing to create phantoms (*The Vomit Talk of Ghosts*), a sensation of surveillance (*This Is the End of Sleeping*) or a self-consciously cinematic composition (the Godard-inflected *This Place Is a Desert*). But the director claims there is a constant. "It all stems from trying to work on naturalism," he explains. "I wanted to take up the game that all my incredibly cool teachers—Robert Woodruff and Anne Bogart—had said was dead. It was my rebellion."

The resulting works, exquisitely designed with the lackadaisical rhythms of everyday speech, look totally unlike the rest of the New York avant-garde, though they ring bells with theater buffs in Germany and France. "I am synthesizing techniques that already exist," Scheib readily admits. "It's just that in Europe, the Wooster Group isn't on the fringes—they've been folded into the mainstream."

Not everybody is a fan. Scheib's dedication to observing human behavior forces theatrical time to slow to something like real time, and the pace downshift can leave viewers impatient and disoriented. (Tip: Pretend you're in a gallery watching an installation.) And while theater has been incorporating projection for decades, audiences still rankle at how the video steals focus. Says Scheib: "Desert upset a lot of people. Theater audiences feel bad that they're watching a screen. But for me, video is a delivery system. It's simply a way to bring the performer closer."

Scheib may be the most acclaimed experimental American director whose work you have never seen. The New York premiere of *This Place Is a Desert* during *Under the Radar* in January moved him into the critical spotlight, but this production at P.S. 122 will be his first high-profile run of any length here.

New York economics hobble Scheib's process. His languorous, ensemble-driven works need long rehearsal periods and the kind of technical fine-tuning that can't be done on Off-Off Broadway's panicky schedule. At MIT, he develops work in peace, and then spends roughly four months in Europe making pieces at well-funded spots like the Staatstheater Saarbrücken or Salzburg's Mozarteum. The expense of dealing with Equity and New York real estate drives our most interesting directors into the arms of European state funding.

Another major director who gigs too rarely in New York, Woodruff taught Scheib, but now sees him as a colleague. "It's great that he found a home at MIT," Woodruff says. "He can fly off to Europe, but he still has a place to do his research. If you find another setup like that—please tell me first." The struggle for funding is just another reason to make *Untitled Mars*. "You should go to these space-vision conferences," Scheib says with a chuckle. "That community sounds just like a theater conference—it's always about the lack of funding. It's very rarely about art."

Untitled Mars: This Title May Change is at P.S. 122.

culture

TOTALY LEGAL SUBSTANCE

Mars Bard

Playwright Jay Scheib is on a mission to bring planet Mars into the limelight, with a new stage show.

"I love science fiction," says playwright and MIT professor Jay Scheib, 38. "But when it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up."

Example: A group of rogue scientists are planning to inhabit the planet in the next 10 years, but flying there would most likely be a one-way suicide mission. "The fact that there are people willing to give their lives to get to Mars is shocking," says Jay, who first heard about the mission through a few of his drama

and math university in Cambridge, Mass. For one thing, he teaches in the music and theater arts program, introducing otherwise stage-shy engineers to the basics of acting. He also doesn't look like a typical academic. Sitting in the downtown performance space P.S. 122, where *Untitled Mars* debuts on Tuesday, Jay appears more British rocker (à la Jarvis Cocker) than tweedy professor. In his lean pinstripe pants, black blazer and dark wool scarf, he is not at all out of place in the experimental East

P.S. 122.) His usual focus is on opera and Greek drama, but this month he has been devoted to the red planet, rehearsing inside an abandoned Wall Street bank vault ("It's so weird," he says. "There are still employee memos on the wall from 2001") and readying the set at P.S. 122. "We are painting the theater completely white," he says. "I want it to look like a cross between a space station on Mars and a science lab on Earth."

The play tells the story of a seven-person team that lands on Mars and must adapt to a new planet—and its bitter-cold, jail-cell conditions—or die. Throughout the play, Jay interrupts the onstage action to interview (via live video feed) real aeronautics students and their mentors at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah. His questions about their research lends the show the aura of a real-world science documentary.

Trekkies, rejoice: *Untitled Mars* is the first in a trilogy of space-age plays, called *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*, that Jay plans to complete over the coming years. After this show closes in New York, however, Jay is off to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to stage a new opera based on the works of Gertrude Stein. Still, the busy professor is happy to have embraced science in his writing: "I work inside the culture of nerd at MIT," he explains. "I took the time to listen to what my students were talking about, and I was hooked. Now I really want to bring the science into arts and sciences."

—Rachel Syme

Untitled Mars (This Title May Change) will run Apr. 8–27 at P.S. 122 (150 First Ave., at Ninth St.).



Footage of aeronautics students at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah is later woven within Jay's play.

students. "I immediately felt inspired to write something."

Despite the justifiably nerdy subject of the resulting work, *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*, Jay is as far from a geek as one could imagine—especially for a professor at MIT, the famed science

Village theater.

Jay divides his time between Massachusetts and New York, where he keeps an apartment on the Lower East Side, under the Williamsburg Bridge. (Coincidentally, he met his fiancée, a writer and actress, at a November 2006 show at

"When it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up."

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Theater

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Untitled Mars: This Title May Change

P.S. 122 Conceived and directed by Jay Scheib. With ensemble cast.

1hr 30mins. No Intermission.



SPACE ODDITY Sweeney, right, encounters an astronaut.

Photograph: Justin Bernhaut

Director Jay Scheib doesn't look like a geek. With his art-school specs, tousled hair and stylish attire, this laid-back orchestrator of multimedia installations surrounds himself with strikingly attractive actors and sexy technology. Yet scratch the surface and under the hipster auteur you might find a chubby nerd building a spaceship out of tin foil and cardboard in the garage. Now, Scheib and his dedicated actor-technicians have graduated to fancier materials with *Untitled Mars: This Title May Change*, a docu-video-performance piece that merges speculative science and avant-garde theatrics.

The elaborate, multizoned playing space created by Peter Ksander (the most ingenious set designer working downtown) is a recreation of the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah—itsself a simulation of the Martian landscape, where scientists hope we'll establish a colony. The plot (related in elliptical fragments) is a crude pastep of soap-opera seductions and sci-fi pulp, featuring a real-estate villain (Caleb Hammond), a heroic repair woman (Tanya Selvaratnam) and a scientist (April Sweeney) who may have found a link between schizophrenia and clairvoyance. Oh, and there's a guy in green makeup with a giant lizard tail.

Using live video feeds and editing software to create the illusion of walking on the Martian surface, Scheib masterfully blends high-tech effects with his performers, who wrestle and simulate sex with gusto. (He himself appears, quizzing real scientists about space exploration via Skype linkup.) Even though the message—wherever we humans go, we'll bring our problems—is old as Ray Bradbury, at least the vehicle is super space age. (See also "Martian to a different drummer," page 161.)

—David Cote

<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/events/off-off-broadway/54302/521200/untitled-mars>