

A Technological Rebel's Sacred Journey

(The Wild, Weird and Wonderful Worldview of M. Stefan Strozier)

By Steven Gerard Farrell

The 21st century has almost completed its first decade of life, and yet the 20th century is still lingering in all aspects of American arts and letters. M. Stefan Strozier, publisher of **World Audience** magazine, is an author and intellectual who is eager to be the eventual Brutus to sink his justifiable dagger into the Caesar tyrant that was the 20th century model of publishing books, producing plays and the creation of art in the United States.

I only stumbled across the man and his works in recent weeks, and I am amazed at how somebody so young has managed to already be the creator of such a large body of work that includes plays, poems, short stories, criticism and essay. Besides the intense literary merits of his various works, it may be that Strozier's greatest contribution to American culture in the role as a publisher; a publisher with a new model for publishing. M. Stefan Strozier is hell-bent on leading a crusade against the 'Liberal Bastion' and the 'Mafioso of Misfits' that he contends controls all aspects of art, especially art produced for commercial purposes. Strozier singles out "English teachers and publicists" (**Sickness of the Young**, 2001) as his biggest enemies; for he believes that they promote "hippiethink" (my term) that is now long outdated and should have died-off completely years ago. Hippiethink has long become groupthink when it comes to the world of and books. Indeed, this old fashion ideology still holds Broadway, Wall Street and the universities in its clutches. It was a world that weaned me and millions of others.

In “Interview with Kurt Vonnegut” (**The Essays and Criticism of M. Stefan Strozier, vol 1**, 2006), Strozier declares war in a non-existent interview with the befuddled novelist. “This is revolution against the hippie cartel that controls all art in America.” It is a war that will rage until free verse poetry, modern art and Broadway are erased for good. Along the way, Strozier refers to George Plimpton as ‘a mediocre writer’ and Dr. Louis Manand of the New Yorker as a ‘candy-ass’. To read Strozier is to be offended and entertained at the same time. I may not always agree, but I’m always laughing. One should always remember the motto of the French Structuralists (Jacque Lacan, Roland Barthes and company) movement after World War Two: ‘sacred cows make the best hamburger’. Strozier is a literary Peter Griffith who loves to toss mud and turds at everything held sacred by the scholarly world, even the great bard, William Shakespeare, is blown off with the word ‘quaint’.

However, for critics to dismiss Stefan as a mere shock jock of an artist, or a wise-aleck renegade among the highbrows, would be to making a serious misjudgment; for he quite possibly could be one of America’s most important historical playwrights to be writing for the stage today. **The Whales (2005), Guns, Shackles and Winter Coats (2005), The Tragedy of Lincoln (2007), The Green Game (2007), Belzec December Night (2009), and La Revolucion (2009)** have already given the theatrical world an impressive body of works. What makes things more intriguing is that he has produced these plays on Off-Off Broadway and Off-Broadway. He isn’t the first person to contend that Broadway, like Hollywood, has long been caught-up in the “spend millions to make millions.” Broadway has long-ago stopped being the producer of art. If the big bucks don’t kill the arts, it’ll be political correctness that provides the fatal death blow...In a hilarious scene in **The**

Whales, readers from **Samuel French**, the **Times** and the **New Yorker** are busily engaged in the contest to see who could reach the East River with their tossed manuscripts. “Oh no, those are plays I’m still considering. My students-interns from Columbia weed-out the pro-gay, pro-Jew, pr-black, pro-feminist...the rest, out the window, to try and reach the East River,” cried out one of the readers in glee. Strozier, I’m sure, is not attacking any one of the groups he mentions; rather, he attacks any selection system that is exclusive of many true playwrights with universal themes who aren’t writing ‘kitchen sink dramas’ and a system that is replacing one set of prejudices with another. By forcing us to watch another drab slice of life play featuring one of life’s victims transforms all of us into victims.

The Whales features a cast of such all-American crazies such as Cool Joe, Dionysus, Harry, the Butter Fly Fairies and the Chinese passengers. Uncle Wong, Strozier’s answer to Beckett’s own elusive Godot, delivers the funniest line in the play with, “Read message of fortune cookie! Answer must be found, not own answer!”

Julie Hobson, an Instructor in the English Department at Greenville Technical College in Greenville, South Carolina, had this to say about **The Whales**: “It was so original. It’s like nothing I have read before. The Whales is creative, imaginative and completely crazy. It’s also loads of laughs and fun!” As I read this play, it put me in mind of Brendan Behan’s last play, **Richard’s Corkleg**, an Irish laugh fest that keeps the one liners rolling. I was also reminded of the description of the old Yiddish theatre that was popular at the close of the 19th century in New York. My understanding was that the productions put on for their Eastern European audiences were full of songs, dances, ad-libs, pratfalls and mayhem. The Marx Brothers and the Three Stooges carried on the tradition of the Yiddish theatre with their films in the Thirties and Forties.

I have written a review elsewhere (**Fools Seeking For Wisdom In A Revolution**) about Strozier's most recent play, **La Revolucion**, which revolves around the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and how he weaves such historical figures as Zapata, Villa and Blackjack Pershing into his play. It rivals his earlier piece, **The Tragedy of Lincoln**, which revolves around the final days of the Civil War and the life of Abraham Lincoln. Once again, the playwright returns to his history lessons and skillfully employs such famous personages as Frederick Douglass, Mary Todd Lincoln, and, most effectively, John Wilkes Booth to help propel the action. The scene where Lincoln encounters the ghostly image of his murderer, Booth, in a waking dream is one of the most haunting to be presented on stage in year.

In **Guns, Shackles and Winter Coats**, M. Stefan Strozier takes on the contemporary scene by exploring the difficulties of a shattered veteran of Desert Storm. It is a bold venturing into uncharted territory for both the American theatre, as well as the American psyche. The play harkens back to the old Robert DeNiro movie, **Deerhunter**, which was the first time Hollywood dared to use film to force us to look backwards to a war we as a society wanted to forget. John Brown, a sergeant who had lost his squad during a sneak attack over in the Near East, returns to the United States and is unable to adjust to civilian life. This poor soul soon finds himself on the cold streets of the city after being ditched by his German wife, Kara (who, to me symbolizes, modern day Germany-dominated Europe, who selfishly ditches America once they received their make-over and the going got tough) and is ejected from a veterans' hospital by an ungrateful nation (one that has never been grateful to those who had fought for its causes). I think that the main character of the work is aptly named John Brown. Strozier, a native of the land of Lincoln, Grant

and Stephen Douglas, is a serious student of the Civil War, and it's really no coincident that his modern-day martyr is named often the number one martyr of the anti-slavery cause. My only major complaint of this play is how it was concluded: Brown would have not allowed Kerry, a homeless Vietnam veteran, to eject him from his man-made shanty without a fight.

Perhaps my favorite play by Strozier is **Belzec December Night**. When I first started reading it, I almost put it down, thinking it was another riff on the Anne Frank Diary motif. However, the confrontational but love-filled interaction between the middle-aged Jewish couple (Abraham and Ruth Bauer) and their collective hopes for the successful escape to America of their daughter caught my attention; for it rather reminded me of the bantering and bickering of Archie and Edith Bunker (as well as other television couples). The train ride to the concentration camp is one of the greatest examples ever of supreme love mingling with the ultimate terror on stage. I am a man who prides himself on the fact that I have rarely cried in my adult life. Only my mother's funeral and certain Irish ballads turn on the faucets. I did burst-out in tears when the couple teased one another about their silly ambitions: she had wanted to be a Broadway star and he had the secret desire to be a race car driver. That is exactly the stupid thing a long-married and deeply in love married couple would tease one another about as they are carted towards their destiny of doom.

Abraham and Ruth chart their course to Belzec, a Nazi death camp in Poland, by the position of the moon whose beams guides them to their fate as well as reminds them of their love and life.. The man-made Hell of Hitler can't tear asunder what God has declared in Heaven. Whereas the great William Shakespeare would have devoted pages of passionate poetic raptures between his lover-struck couple, Strozier tactfully and quickly concludes with Ruth saying, "This is the end for us, Abraham," and Abraham replying with, "Yes. It has been quite a day."

Since I am a writer myself, I thought this play could be improved by ending with Ruth Zimmerman, the daughter of the daughter who escaped Nazi Europe and the granddaughter, addressing the audience with, “yes, grandmother, your daughter made it to America. I’m an American girl. Oh, grandma, I love you too!” It was Anna who actually bestirs the ghosts of her grandparents’ fateful last trip when she is forced to do a term paper on the Holocaust for a college class and she comes across a long forgotten letter written in 1942.

M. Stefan Strozier’s collection of poems, **Schizophrenia Poetry**, put this reader in mind of Allen Ginsburg, Charles Bukowski and other poets of the Beat Generation of the Fifties and Sixties, as well as Baudelaire, Rimbaud and other writers of the French Decadent movement of the 19th century; his words being filled with madness, impotent rage and the wonderment of thought. His one collection of short stories, **Sickness of the Young**, follows closely in the footsteps of American and European Bohemian fiction. My own personal favorite story in the book is **The Stinger**, Strozier’s answer to Ernest Hemingway’s **Old Man and the Sea**. Joey, an Irishman, and the Captain, an Englishman, discuss the centuries-old conflict between Ireland and England, must come to terms with their own memory ghosts as they lie dying on a raft boat after *The Stinger*, the name of the fishing boat, has been destroyed at sea by a ‘perfect storm.’

Strozier’s book of poetry consists of an apprentice baker’s two dozen. In **Sponge Bob**, Strozier once again crosses swords with the establishment with these words: “We have to defeat the conspiracy.” Strozier also engages in his own Jacob-like wrestling match with his own personal demons:

Then was a time when
I did not have answers

I could call home

I spent a lot of time in the library,
Reading,
Writing poems, like this one,
Observing

I had to grapple with the unhappy likelihood that Strozier poetic consciousness had to be forged during his rudderless days in Las Vegas. Strozier's long Joycean journey to artistic awareness perhaps reaches its zenith with perhaps his best poem, **Charlie Rose**. Any reader of this review can goggle the title and see Strozier own YouTube reading of the poem. It is a poignant scream!

I'll conclude this brief overview of the wild, weird and wonderful worldview of M. Stefan Strozier by closing with five lines from his piece, **Poems**, that sums up his writings, his intellectual pursuits and his war to bring American arts to a renaissance using technology in this 21st century. It also provided me with the title for this piece.

The poet is a mystic,
Part of an ancient order,
Traveling an a sacred journey,
To bring humans
Closer to darkness

Many a young American artist would feel themselves honored to be a member of such a worthy ancient order. I have also grabbed my pilgrim's staff and my beggar's cup to join M. Stefan Strozier on his sacred journey.

The End