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Gazette

No. 10

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Wednesday, February 2, Year 0

EMERGENCY

Watch Your Step: De La Vega



We see with our feet.
- R.W. Emerson

Do you keep your gaze fixed to the ground as you walk the streets of New York? Are you in the

habit of counting the cracks in the sidewalk? Have you ever tried to read the dirt of the street, to discern the great book that prostrates itself right under your feet?

If so, you might have noticed some parts of this text that are more legible than the other. You have probably noticed the hermetic graffiti left behind by electrical, gas and telephone companies, which emerge from the ornamentation of puke, spit and oil stains. You could not avoid noticing the discreet pavement graffiti advertisements for recently released independent films and even for big Broadway shows. On the more ingenious side, fliers and cards advertising X-rated stores and peep shows casually scattered among the street junk.

You have probably already stopped noticing those markings and material remnants of various street games that persistently follow you from the days of your early childhood, inviting you to participate in the play that is already finished, your feet automatically following the hopscotch pattern.

Finally, have you ever asked yourself, as you rush down the street, what the ground under your feet keeps, what it takes, what it supports, and what it rejects?

On November 13, around 9AM, I was reminded of all of these questions. As I walked on Amsterdam Avenue near Columbia University, a display of images and texts unraveled under my feet. All of the works were executed in white chalk and signed "De La Vega," the name that I have already seen inscribed on sidewalks in other parts of the city. De La Vega's chalk graffiti are traces of a work in progress: on the pavement near Columbia's campus gate was the unfinished sentence, "the pressure of survival..." Something interrupted the writer. A campus guard? An aggressive passerby? A few yards further north on Amsterdam Avenue the inscription was completed: "The pressure of survival in the big city will make you lose sight of your dream ... Hang in there. - De La Vega." These graffiti are at the same time a work in progress: they last until the first rain. The chalk is erased by the street walkers who step over it. Texts and images are scattered by the gazes and the soles of the public they address. They are erased and destroyed in the act of reading and walking.

Similarity between De La Vega's work and the conventional spray graffiti is limited to the insistence on a brand name, a "tag", and the work's replicability. Unlike the spray graffiti of the eighties, De La Vega's street art of the late nineties does not, can not, become a crime. The very choice of the medium—chalk—makes De La Vega's work inoffensive and ephemeral. It is the art of tamed, crime-free New York streets. Spray graffiti artists insisted on the spectacular side of their work: it was an energetic protest, a visual cry. De La Vega reminds us that the cry is still there: it is almost invisible and inaudible, but it still exists.

While spray graffiti artists used subway cars and the empty walls of public buildings as the surface on which they worked, De La Vega insists on the earthly, horizontal position of his "canvas." His messages are inscribed on the pavement. (There is one exception: his signature slogan, "Become your dream," written on the lower part of a wall on West 18th Street.) They address the itinerant urban dwellers, who keep their gaze fixed to the ground, minding their own business and avoiding eye contact.

Finally, unlike the spray graffiti artists, who emphasized the visual side of the text at the expense of legibility, De La Vega insists on the readability of his/her messages. The visual design and length of these texts are tailored to the situation of street reading: the writing is clear and concise, it offers itself to readers who are in transit, who don't pause to read and contemplate, who catch the city writing that surrounds them with the corner of their eye. De La Vega's work does not ask for a lot of attention. It is the street text—text that exists in an instance and counts on the afterthought.

The content of De La Vega's messages is sometimes laconic: "In the theatre of life, you too will have your moment. - De La Vega" (November 13, Amsterdam and West 110th), or "You are your best investment" (November 22, W18th between 5th and 6th Avenue). De La Vega's work is reminiscent of performance art because of its ephemerality: whoever writes about it has to cite the precise spatial and temporal co-ordinates of these text-events. Moreover, the most effective De La Vega works are the ones that insist on the engagement of the reader/beholder. In these conceptual works, De La Vega engages urban strollers in an innocent game: On the corner of West 4th and Mercer Streets in the Village, a message reads: "↑ You are now entering Spanish Harlem↑ - De La Vega" (written across the sidewalk on West 4th, arrows pointing toward the West Village, November 19th). Consider also the "De La Vega word puzzle"—random letters scattered across the sidewalk (Washington Place and Broadway, December 1999).

If spray graffiti artists adopted and appropriated certain methods of commodity advertising—most notably, visual aggressiveness and repetition—De La Vega offers a response to the commodity culture. "Become your dream," De La Vega's staple slogan suggests a street surrealism. November 13, Amsterdam Avenue and West 110th Street: drawing of a woman figure in a "primitive" style; in her raised right hand she holds a bird (virginity), between the fingers of her lowered left hand is a cigarette (consumption); across her chest the text: "Become your dream."

However, De La Vega is also something of a street preacher. An item from the pavement exhibit on Amsterdam Avenue: a drawing of a serpent with its tongue sticking out;

along the back of the beast, from head to tail stretches the text: "During peaceful moments watch for danger. - De La Vega."

Sometimes it seems that De La Vega intentionally distances him/herself from the spray graffiti artists. I have never seen De La Vega works in the subway. The closest they get to this famous gallery space is the pavement in front of a subway entrance.

However, the one thing that De La Vega shares with graffiti artists is their relative anonymity. Indeed, who is De La Vega? You are free to imagine him/her any way you like. De La Vega's identity disappears in the non-identity of the street.

November 30th, Washington Place and Broadway: "Don't let money change you. - De La Vega." The next day, the response to this message was added in a different handwriting: "All I ask is for a chance to prove that money can't buy happiness. - not De La Vega." Who is De La Vega? Who is "not De La Vega"? What is important in this ephemeral dialogue written in chalk is the prefix *not*. The question of identity, as all urban strollers know very well, is not "Who am I?" but "Who am I *not*?" Anybody can be the "not De La Vega," including De La Vega him/herself.

So De La Vega stands there in the nameless crowd, watching his/her works being smeared by pedestrians, their steps and glances. De La Vega works are created without witnesses, under conditions of relative privacy in an empty street (in the small hours of the night? at daybreak?). They are consumed under the categorical and destructive openness of the busy daytime street.

This homeless art points toward the paradoxical nature of the street as a dwelling place, toward the simultaneity of its extreme privacy and extreme publicity. The extreme loneliness of the walker/reader/artist and the extreme presence of others. The extreme lack of focus and extreme perceptiveness.

De La Vega is a benevolent work, which reveals the ultimate uselessness and ephemerality of writing. Nothing has been written in stone. Writing survives only as reading. "I have just bought a piece of real estate in your mind. - De La Vega" (November 13, 1999, Amsterdam Avenue and West 110th).

Branislav Jakovljevic

Don't Panic.

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EMERGENCY is a FREE and BI-WEEKLY gazette, providing an immediate response to what's really happening in theater, film and performance. EMERGENCY is not a consumer guide. The idea: To liberate the form of critical response from the limitation of conventional review etiquette. EMERGENCY seeks: essays, random reviews, manifestos, dialogues with colleagues, proposals for "impossible theater". Please send us word of open rehearsals, guerilla acts, collaborations, shows, and screenings.

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Reviews!

2 for INFRARED
by Mac Wellman

THE FLEA THEATER
41 White Street.
See LISTINGS for
details.
Closes on Feb 5.



Fancy Pants Takes On The Mac Daddy

Last week I went to see Fancy Pants' production of INFRARED by Mac Wellman. I had never seen any of Wellman's work before, but I knew he was a poet and had won some Obies, so I was expecting something good. I had also never been to The Flea before, and was surprised at how swanky it was. There was a spiffy sign outside, and the lobby was decorated with elegant drapery and some bat-shaped sconces (the BAT Theater Company operates here). But just as I started to take off my coat and get comfy, I came back to Off Off Broadway reality: the theater space itself—at least on that Saturday afternoon—was unheated.

Directed by James Godwin, INFRARED stars three attractive women (Susan Heimbinder, Jennifer Cooper, and Leigh Secrest) clad in men's white cotton pajamas. The best part of the play is the women's deft recitation of it. One woman is speaking and then the other two chime in and say the same word at the same time. This is fun to watch.

My absolute favorite part of the play is when the three women recite one long passage perfectly simultaneously, with one woman speaking in a soprano voice, one alto, and one middle. As they did this they held flashlights under their chins, the way camp counselors in slasher movies do when they tell ghost stories. It was very beautiful, like a church choir that was speaking instead of singing, and I could have listened to it all day. Unfortunately, it only lasted a minute or so.

The plot—about a woman who discovers that her shadow has been swallowed up by a hole—was hard to follow, so I tried instead to track the moments that illuminated the play's bigger themes (i.e. the dual nature of existence, light and shadow, doppelgangers, etc). But the presentation made this difficult.

I was most confused by the play's kiddee-bedtime-story feel. The latter was emphasized in many ways: the pajamas; extensive use of puppetry; and the gals' frequent leaning forward in their chairs and making eye contact as if they were children's librarians reading GOODNIGHT MOON.

The puppets are well-crafted and nice to look at, but ultimately, all the bedtime-story stuff and the the murky plot got in the way of understanding the duality-of-existence stuff.

Here's what I would love: if Mr. Wellman would take all the plot out of this play, reduce it to a twenty-minute poem on the dual nature of existence, and then let Mr. Godwin direct the women in reading it flash-light-harmony style.

Amy Fusselman

INFRARED

Mac Wellman's latest, feat. Fancy Pants. Ends Feb 5! Thu-Sat 10pm, Sat 2pm. Reviewed in this issue. Flea Theater, 41 White St., 226-0051. \$15.

BLACK MILK QUARTET

Paul Zimet wrote and directed these musical one-acts. For example: a hunter transformed into a stag; a housewife abandoning her family for an invisible lover. Ends Feb 6, Wed-Sat at 8, Sun at 7. Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster St., 696-8594. \$12.

THE IMPOSSIBLE SAFARI

Written & performed by Rick Grey. Directed by Colin Campbell. Rick joins the Peace Corp in bizarre attempt to improve his acting. Ends Feb 5! Fri/Sat at 10:30. HERE, 145 6th Ave. 647-0202. \$12.

THE MEMOIRS OF GLUCKEL OF HAMELN

An adaptation in Banksang, or picture recitation form, of the only pre-modern memoir by a woman in Yiddish. Performed by Jenny Romaine and Roberto Rossi (of Great Small Works), directed by Romaine. Music by Adrienne Cooper, the foremost interpreter of Yiddish vocal music in America, and composer Frank London of the Klezmatiks. Features puppets and design by Clare Dolan of Bread and Puppet Theater. Ends Feb 6! La MaMa, 74A E 4th St., 475-7710.

GOGOL BORDELLO

The most theatrical Ukrainian punk band to hit New York since the revolution. Certainly one of the best things you'll catch at Joe's Pub. Feb 11 at 8 at Joe's Pub, Public Theater, 425 Lafayette. 239-6200. \$15.

THE SADNESS OF OTHERS

Mike Taylor directs some very talented performers, including renowned clown Gregor Paslawsky. Thru Feb 13, Thu-Sun at 7:30, Sun at 3. La Mama, 74 E. 4 St., 475-7710. \$12.

NIGHT VISION

"A New Third to First World Vampire Opera" Conceived/Composed by Fred Ho. Libretto by Ruth Margraff. Directed by Tim Maner. Jan 26 - Feb 19 at 9pm. HERE, 145 6th Ave., 647-0202. \$12-15.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The Wooster Group re-works and re-mounts a piece originally shown in 1984. Thru Feb 27, Tue-Sun at 8pm. 33 Wooster St., 966-3651. \$25 /ushering.

CHARLIE VICTOR ROMEO

Text taken from "black box" cockpit voice recorder transcripts of six major airline emergencies. Extended for the second time. Jan 13-Apr 1, Thu-Sat at 8. Collective: Unconscious. 145 Ludlow St. 254-5277. \$10.

BOX

Open salon every Saturday, 10pm till late. Says James, "Sometimes I'm in my underwear, people knock on the door, and the performance begins." Call 212-875-7171 for info. BOX, 70 Commercial St. (& Box St.), Storefront 102, Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

SALAD OF THE BAD CAFE

Split Britches (Peggy Shaw, Stacey Makishi, and Lois Weaver) wrote and perform. Sound by Vivian Stoll and choreography by Stormy Brandenberger. Feb 17-Mar 4. La MaMa, 74A E 4th St., 475-7710.

BAD BOY NIETZSCHE!

Richard Foreman's newest, about Nietzsche throwing his arms around a horse, at the Ontological-Hysterical Theater. St. Marks Church, 2nd Ave & 10th St., 533-4650. \$15.

DONKEY SHOW

Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner adapted A Midsummer's Night Dream and got a wack disco. Everything is fun and funny until the fairy dust kicks in and decadence ends in bestiality. Comedy (like disco) has never seemed so evil. Thu-Sun at 8, Fri & Sat at 10:30, Club El Flamingo, 547 W.21 St., 307-4100. \$25.

WEEKEND WITH CHARLES MEE

Mee is one of the best American playwrights living today. Anne Bogart and the SITI Company continue their ambitious Guest Artist program with a weekend intensive workshop with the man himself. March 18 & 19 12-5pm. SITI Studio, 10 E.1 St., 477-1469.

The Emergency Room: Mac Wellman's INFRARED

Let's not mince. The guy is fuckin' good. He's on the mic. He's in with The Word. Go see it before you go out drinking—it only lasts an hour and will provide jocund conversation over many pints after.

What is it about? Give me a break! It's about us, in New York City, at this very moment, walking around or sleepwalking-through a state of emergency! What is it about? Shadows and holes and the differences and convergences and crosshatching our lives together and apart. The shadow of the Flatiron Building, inside which we work and eat our lunch hour pizza and unpeel the wax paper and throw it into a trash can—all million of us at once! And who notices? Even oxygen is spoon fed into our anuses—and what's outside the office? Dolls and puppets and dogs and losing your shadow and shadow becoming flesh becoming hole becoming hot soup in your winter bowl. This play nourishes. Its laughter heals, does not destroy.

Wellman is a master of the epic form of piling debris-language and gesture and human body-together on top of one another in one mounting thundering obsidian obelisk. His gaze is that of the Angel of History, blown back first into the future, seeing and transcribing the catastrophe of our past and present, yet unable to stop it.

He demands we awake from our poppy-cup called Political Naivete, hop over the ditch we have dug around ourselves. What is "The Other" we hide from? How do we get back together, communicate with each other? Slash the fabric of lies—whether words or lights or bodies or the fabulous performers—or all of them together be our machete. His language never rests, flipping from comic book jivetalk, to colloquial city diary, to extra-literary aesthete delicacy, with ease and speed that is, in Frank O'Hara's phrase, "the wings of an extraordinary liberty." Tender and vulnerable, yet tough simultaneously, a woman will find her shadow → by entering a new world → of INFRARED → Friend, you can go too! What can I say? I pissed all over the program.

Filip Marinovic



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TWO SERIOUS LADIES

Look out Jane Bowles fans: Ken Rus Schmall adapted and directed this never-before-staged Bowles novel. See it, before the five performances fly by. Feb 16-19 at 8, Feb 19 at 2. Horace Mann Theater, 120th St & B'way, 854-3859 / www.paperveins.org/jane. \$10/ \$5 stud.

EDWARD SAID

His lecture, entitled: "What is Humanism in 20th Century America?" Presented as part of Miller Theater's Theater of Ideas series. Part 1 Feb 16 at 8pm, Part 2 Feb 17 at 8, Part 3 Feb 18 at 8. Miller Theater, 116th Street & B'way, 854-1633. \$15.

HOUSATRASH

Trav S.D. wrote, directed, produced, and stars in this satire of America, sub-titled A Musical About the Wretched Refuse. Jan 21-Feb 26 at 10:30. HERE, 145 6th Ave. 647-0202. \$12 includes free moonshine.

THE WINTER'S TALE

Billed as "a rock-inspired production," it includes live music by Junior Fudge. Feb 3-27, Wed - Sat at 8, Sun at 7. Walker-space, 46 Walker St., 414-5136. \$15.

RICHARD III

Edward Einhorn directs a big cast in a small space. Was ever thus a lady wooed? Feb 4-27, Thu & Fri at 7:30, Sat at 7, Sun at 2:30. Nada, 167 Ludlow St., 420-1466.

HENRY V

Sascha Paladino directs this small production of a big play. Feb 6-8, 13-15 at 7. Expanded Arts, 85 Ludlow St., 253-1813. \$12.

ANOTHER TELEPATHIC THING

The promising new work by Big Dance Theater, the wonderful company headed by Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson. Feb 17-Mar 5, Thu-Sat at 8, Sun at 3. Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W.19 St., 924-0077. \$15 first week, \$20 thereafter.

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OCULARIS

Las aventuras de

Juan Quin Quin
Cuba, 1967, Espinosa's experimental feature.
Sunday, Feb 6th, 7 & 9:30
70 N.6th St, Williamsburg
718-388-8713. 5\$ admission

CINEMA CLASSICS: NOIR

Great noir series incl.:
The Killers (1946)
Ava Gardner, Burt Lancaster, directed by Robert Siodmak. Feb 7-8, Mon.&Tue., 8&10pm.
Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
Feb 10-11, Thu/Fri, 8&10pm.
332 E 11th St., 975-1015, \$5

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

Sergei Eisenstein:
Strike (1925) Feb 3 at 8pm.
Battleship Potemkin (1925)
Thursday, Feb 4, at 8pm.
October (1928) Feb 5, 8pm.
Old And New (1929) Feb 6, 2pm.
Que Viva Mexico! (1932) Feb 10, 7pm.
Alexander Nevsky (1938) Feb 11, 8pm.
Ivan the Terrible: Parts 1&2
Sunday, Feb 13, at 6pm.
Stan Brakhage:
short films, Wed. Feb 2, 8pm.
Eyes; Deus Ex, Feb 16, 8pm.
Jim Jarmusch:
Mystery Train (1989)
Feb 17 & 20 at 7; Feb 19 at 2pm.
Dead Man (1995) Feb 18 at 7;
Feb 19 at 9:30; Feb 20 at 2pm.

O T H E R E
or F R E E

THE MYSTERIES

In the 15th century, the only native dramas in England were religious and allegorical plays. The Mysteries are taken from a series of short verse plays written about stories from the Bible, Old and New Testament. Bart Sher directs graduate acting students from Tisch. Feb. 5-6, 8-12 at 8, Feb 6 at 2. Atlas Room Theatre, 111 2nd Ave, 3rd fl., 998-1921. FREE!

DREAM HOUSE

La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela open their dream house to the public to experience seven years of sound and light. Open Thursdays and Saturdays, 2pm - Midnight. 925-8270. 275 Church Street (bet. Franklin & White), #3. FREE!

128 VARIATIONS ON A GEOMETRIC HEART

9 actors perform variations on Heiner Muller's text "Heartpiece". Part of an ongoing series of short performances at the Tate Gallery. Past shows have included texts by Witkiewicz and Khlebnikov. The short piece is performed in a continuous loop on Feb 10, bet. 7-9pm. Tate Gallery, 413 W.14th St. (bet 9&10th), 242-9888. FREE!

BRILLIANT TRACES

Shellen Lubin directs Cindy Lou Johnson's two-character play. Feb 9-27, Wed-Sat at 8, Sun at 3. Trilogy Theater, 341 W.44 St., bet 8 & 9 Ave., 592-3804. \$15/\$12 stud/senrs.

GRASS/BIRD/RODEO

A new solo performance in three parts by Ann Carlson. Feb 10-13, 17-20 at 8:30. PS122, 151 1st Ave., 477-5288. \$20.



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