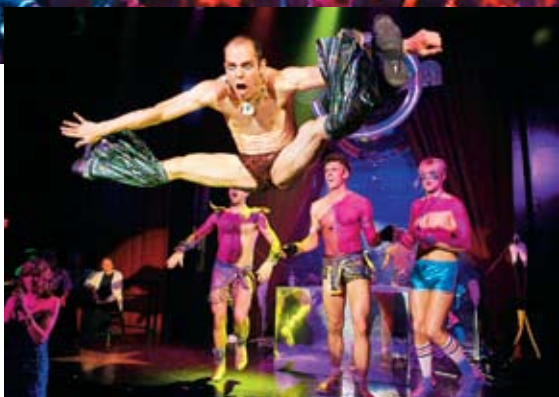




Above: A disco ball and DJ overlook the *Donkey Show* audience as cast members enact a scene. Left: A *Fairy* leaps.



MARCUS STERN/ART

house lights out to keep the audience focused on the stage," she continues. "But people once went to the theater to *flirt*—to see other people in the boxes, to eat and

six hours a day by myself didn't feel like the heart of what the arts meant to me," she says. "I loved the creative process in a *group*—many people coming together and making something great." There were four formative years of the "wild creative activity that undergraduates engage in" at Harvard, where Paulus

drink and shout. For the groundlings of Shakespeare's day, it was very earthy. I look at other forms of live entertainment—pro wrestling, rock concerts—to get my inspiration."

Paulus grew up as a "theater arts kid" in New York City; her father acted and directed, and she danced with the New York City Ballet as a girl and studied piano for 10 years. But

co-founded CityStep, "haunted the Loeb," and wrote a senior social-studies thesis on The Living Theatre, the New York-based experimental theatre group. She didn't want to be an actor "and wait by the phone, hoping for a job," so after completing her two-year workshop training, she earned an M.F.A. in directing at Columbia; she has worked as a freelance director since 1997. Paulus has done plenty of musical theater, including opera (all the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, for example) and, two years ago, a London opera based on the David Lynch film *Lost Highway*. In 2007 and 2008, she directed a revival of *Hair* in Central Park and then took it to Broadway, where it won a 2009 Tony Award.

Traditionally, at the end of *Hair*, the audience mounts the stage and dances until they are spent. That's part of the plan. "You've touched them and made some kind of transformation," Paulus explains. "You want that to have an *outlet*. It's not just the play on the stage—it's the gathering of people." Paulus's invitation is direct and sincere: "Come *be* in my shows."

Again, A Dangerous Art

The brutal, desperate poetry of Frederick Seidel

by ADAM KIRSCH

IT MAY BE HARD TO BELIEVE, reading the small epiphanies and self-flattering revelations that are standard in contemporary American poetry, but for much of the twentieth century poetry was a dangerous art. When T.S. Eliot fused sordid urban scenes with high literary allusions in *The Waste Land*, or Robert Lowell confessed his childhood traumas and mental illness in *Life Studies*, or Sylvia Plath recreated herself as a suicidal avenging angel in *Ariel*, readers reacted as those poets wanted them to: with shock, sometimes with outrage, but always with the fascination that only genuine risk can bring. What made modern poetry modern was not really its experiments with obscurity or formlessness—much

contemporary poetry is obscure and formless, yet utterly unchallenging—but its willingness to confront areas of experience that we are more comfortable ignoring.

No poet working today knows that dangerous truth better than Frederick Seidel '57, whose heartbreaking and deliberately scandalous poetry is collected in *Poems 1959-2009* (Farrar Straus Giroux). "I am civilized," Seidel writes in the bluntly titled "Kill Poem," "but/I see the silence/And write the words for the thought balloon." Those words—the ones we think but know better than to say out loud—are the ones Seidel can't stop himself from repeating. One of the most notorious examples is "Broadway Melody," from his 2006 collection *Ooga-Booga*:



Frederick Seidel

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A naked woman my age is a total
nightmare.
A woman my age naked is a
nightmare.
It doesn't matter. One doesn't care.
One doesn't say it out loud because
it's rare
For anyone to be willing to say it,
Because it's the equivalent of buying
billboard space to display it,

Display how horrible life after
death is,
How horrible to draw your last
breath is,
When you go on living.

It is typical of Seidel to lead off with a statement of such brutality, as though daring the reader to close the book in righteous anger. In this way the righteous are weeded out, and only readers curious or sympathetic enough to go on are allowed to see what leads Seidel to write this way: not misogyny or "ageism," but a desperation so profound that it can speak only in a tone of cruel flippancy. It may be horrible to

draw your last breath and go on living, but the poem concludes by showing us that not all old women and men feel that they are trapped in a living death. On the contrary:

I hate the old couples on their
walkers giving
Off odors of love, and in City Diner
eating a ray
Of hope, and then paying and
trembling back out on Broadway,

Drumming and dancing, chanting
something nearly unbearable,
Spreading their wings in order to be
more beautiful and more terrible.

Love, Seidel seems to be saying, is stronger than death: the old couples who cling to one another in the face of physical decay remain "beautiful" in their fidelity and defiance. If they are also "terrible" to the poet, it can only be because they represent a kind of consolation that is unavailable to him. He hates them because their happiness exposes his misery as a self-inflicted punishment.

Sartre may have said that hell is other

people, but poets have long known that, in fact, hell is being trapped in the self. "Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell," says Milton's Satan, and Gerard Manley Hopkins concurs: "The lost are like this, and their scourge to be/As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse." But few poets have written more horribly and convincingly than Seidel about the torment of selfhood. Reading *Poems 1959-2009*, one is struck by how often Seidel returns to images of people cut off, abandoned, imprisoned. In "Dune Road, Southampton," from his 1998 book *Going Fast*, he writes about the famous case of Sunny von Bülow, who was allegedly poisoned into a coma by her husband:

The neurologist on call introduces
herself to the murderer and
concur.
Locked-in syndrome, just about the
worst.
Alive, with staring eyes.
The mind is unaffected.

And with the patient looking on
expressionlessly,

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Charles Miller seeks an identification, and the exact words, of the German historian referred to by the late Harvard Law School professor Paul Freund in a 1950 essay: "No one would have been more entitled [than Justice Brandeis], or less inclined, to echo the words of the German historian, 'I have spent sleepless nights that others might rest.'"

Josh Gibson hopes someone can identify a short story about a Nazi (not, he thinks, Dietrich von Choltitz, the military governor of Paris after D-Day) who refuses an order to demolish a cathedral and/or its windows. The text describes the man looking through binoculars or a rifle scope as he has his second thoughts.

John Ehrenreich thinks Churchill once said, "Love and war change everything"—meaning certain events such as falling in love, or starting a war, change things irre-

versibly, creating a discontinuity with the past. He would like a verified citation.

"When the Camp says: 'Dig graves now,'...I'll know and be with you" (March-April 2004). Kathleen O'Higgins identified Peter Viereck's poem "To Be Sung," published in *Time and Continuities: Last and First Poems* (1995).

"in Harvard balance" (July-August). Responding to Robert Hoffman's reply, Ernest Bergel (with 20 years' more medical experience) reports hearing "dying in balance" (no "Harvard") in the mid 1950s in the early days of the study of serum electrolyte balance. Doctors focused on sodium, potassium, chloride, and bicarbonate, not realizing the importance of magnesium: "Thus, as they 'corrected' patients' acid/base balance, they often intensified their hypomagnesemia, which led to death." Bergel and Irving Rudman, M.D.,

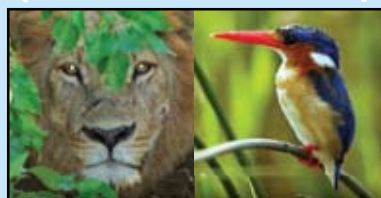
both cite an earlier recording, *The Exanguination Blues* (attributed to a student or house officer at North Carolina Memorial Hospital) that included a song ending, "He died in balance." Bergel suggests "Harvard" might have been added later because of the research of Harvard biochemist A. Baird Hastings, who lectured widely on acid/base balance: "It seems at least plausible that after such a lecture, someone attached the adjective as shorthand to refer to the subject."

"selling the Stradivarius" (September-October). Sean Condon recognized "The Shanahan Strad," by Paul Jones, published by *Collier's* in 1948 and reprinted in *Best Short Shorts*, edited by Eric Berger (1967).

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.

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MONTAGE

Screaming don't let him take me
home, without a sign or sound,
The doctor tells the murderer he can
take her home,
If that's their wish.

There is no mistaking Seidel's terrified sympathy with the victim: he knows all too well what it is like to be conscious and articulate, but unable to make genuine contact with other people. He finds another unforgettable metaphor for this state in "Contents Under Pressure," where he imagines an astronaut cut adrift from his ship:

Absolutely nothing can be done.
The spacecraft is under orders not to
try and to return and does.
He urinates and defecates
And looks out at the universe.
He is looking out at it through his
helmet mask.

If this kind of feeling were pathological, Seidel would be interesting only as a case study. But his manic, disconcerting eloquence convinces us that it is not pathological—that all of us, in some degree, know what this kind of isolation feels like, just as we can all understand Plath's rage and Lowell's despair and Eliot's disgust. In fact, Seidel has a good claim to be the best poetic interpreter of his age, the second half of the twentieth century, when capitalism and technology combined to snap so many of the traditional bonds that once connected person to person.

That is why so many of Seidel's poems are not just deeply confessional but outward-looking, socially and politically and historically informed, with a satirical edge sharpened by the poet's long familiarity with a peculiar corner of international high society. It is, again, easy to be put off by the *luxe* settings and properties of Seidel's poems—the Hotel Carlyle in Manhattan, beach mansions in the Hamptons, Italian motorcycle races, French country estates. He seems to wallow in wealth—but if so, it is only because he remembers what it is that pigs love to wallow in. "The Master Jeweler Joel Rosenthal," a poem from Seidel's Danteque sequence *The Cosmos Trilogy*, gloats that "the richest in the world stick out their necks/And hands and ears for JAR's gems," but then turns around to observe, "Death is loading in the van/The women and camels of King Solomon it is repossessing." The preceding poem in the sequence, "Eternity,"

has this to say about rich people who pursue youth through plastic surgery:

A man who wanted to look better
But not younger is red
Swells of raw.
Later they will remove the staples.

Ten weeks later
They are younger.
They pull over
Their head a sock of skin.

Harvard, Seidel makes clear in his early work, was the first place he encountered this world of alluring and threatening wealth. In *Final Solutions*, his first book, published in 1963, he recalls:

I had given up violin and left St. Louis,
I had given up being Jewish,
To be at Harvard just another
Greek nose in street clothes in
Harvard Yard.

Already, Harvard is the deeply ambivalent symbol it will remain in Seidel's work, a name for success and self-betrayal. It is where he learned to love literature, he suggests in "Untitled": "The steps of Widener led one to the doom of reading." But it is also where he learned the aristocratic accent which his poems so perfectly imitate and travesty: "The very back of the throat without the use of the lips/Produces the bloated drawl of the upper class./You hear it in a certain set, you see it in a certain scene," he writes in "On Wings of Song." And for Seidel, there is no doubt about the nightmare to which all such dreams of elegance must lead:

The king is in his counting-house
counting out his money.
His head will be hacked off and
saved;
The carcass goes to the dogs—after
the servants drink the blood
And defecate. There is another
accent, that goes to Harvard,
That anyone who does can have. My
babysitter
Harold Brodkey will. One day I, too,
I will.

Adam Kirsch '97 is a senior editor at the *New Republic* and a columnist for the online magazine *Tablet*. His most recent collection of poems is *Invasions* (Ivan R. Dee).