



Cover and interior pages of *The Space of Poetics* (2015), printed in an edition of 20

one of a kind or printed in small editions) made with woodcut and letterpress. It diagrams a paragraph from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's treatise *The Poetics of Space*, a work that considers how people

inhabit physical spaces, and how that affects their experiences and memories. To show the syntactical relationships in the excerpt, Hulsey uses imagery gleaned from the 32-volume *Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlas of Philadelphia* of 1916, which collects grid plans of all the city's blocks, color-coded by building material, updated by hand over the years. Just as syntax connects the words in Bachelard's writing, rooms are linked in electrical wiring diagrams and blueprints.

Hulsey's process may sound intimidating, and her subject matter esoteric. Yet the resulting prints are playful, prompting creative interpretation from viewers whether or not they understand the linguistic underpinnings. But unlike traditional maps, or the infographics pervasive in today's media, her art does not merely communicate data points in a pleasing way. Instead, as she puts it, "The former linguist in me hopes that as a body, the work will inspire a little bit of awe at how elaborate and complicated the linguistics system is." By visually investigating elements of language, Hulsey's art compels viewers to look harder, listen better, and notice more. A picture is worth a thousand words, but her works speak in their own way.

but still works in the same studio, pursuing her intellectual interests through artistic practice.

Currently, Hulsey is mapping the words in seventeenth-century astronomy books brought to her attention by a curator at the Huntington Library in Los Angeles. Her creative process has three parts: "There's the aesthetic, visual place where it starts, and then the conceptual part of it is largely analytical, and then there's the manual, craft production of it." Typically, she begins with a visual inspiration, like a star chart, that guides the graphic identity

or overarching style of the piece. She then examines an accompanying text to figure out how its language follows rules and exhibits patterns, whether of word frequency, pitch of sound, or lexical relations. Finally, she depicts her linguistic analyses in the same visual vein as the original diagram—in this series, by using intaglio printing (in which an image is etched onto a plate and the incision holds the ink) in the fashion of the star charts, which map constellations, that appear in the books.

Her recent work *The Space of Poetics* is an artist's book (a handmade art object,

The Lion's Share

Benjamin Scheuer takes his life story out on the road.

by LAURA LEVIS

THE ONLY PROPS in *The Lion*, the critically acclaimed musical by Benjamin Scheuer '04, are the chair he sits on and six gorgeous guitars. Among them, there's a gentle 1929 Martin,

an electric Gibson that growls, and a stylin' Froggy Bottom H-12, which Scheuer got as a thirtieth birthday present.

But the two most important instruments Scheuer has ever played are not on

stage with him. The first is a toy banjo that his lawyer father made for him out of the lid of a cookie tin, some rubber bands, and an old necktie for the strap. Scheuer played it alongside his father on the front porch, mimicking his finger strokes. The second instrument is the guitar his father played, which the teenage Scheuer inherited after a sudden brain aneurysm killed his father and sent his world into chaos.

Told mostly through whimsical and poignant songs, *The Lion* traces Scheuer's quest

to understand the parts of his father that he never could as a boy: the manic rages, the disappointment in his son, and the discouragement regarding music as a career. It's also the story of the son's attempts, across nearly 20 years, to reconnect with the father he loved, the man who taught him the joy of music. "I don't know that I wrote this show in order to come to grips with my father's death," he says. "I think I needed to understand my father's death in order to write the show."

On stage, Scheuer sports a wide boyish grin, a well-tailored suit, and floppy hair. He both charms and disarms the audience with his intensely personal story (told while transitioning among the six guitars). Born as a few songs the New York singer-songwriter had strung together while playing Greenwich Village coffeehouses and bars, *The Lion*, now a 70-minute solo show, has been praised by *The New York Times* and the *Huffington Post*, and has won London's Offie Award for Best New Musical. Scheuer, *The Boston Globe* wrote, "... can pluck the audience's heartstrings as skillfully as he does his guitar." The show, which had earlier runs off-Broadway and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, began a one-year, five-city tour in August at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Massachusetts, before traveling to Milwaukee, Rochester, Washington D.C., and Pittsburgh. The animated music videos for two of its songs have won prizes at the Anecy Film Festival, The Crystal Palace Festival, and the British Animation Awards.

Scheuer began delving into his father's death about three years ago, when he released an album, *The Bridge*, recorded with his band, The Escapist Papers. Nervous about performing the songs live, he decided to write down a script that would explain the genesis of his lyrics to the audience. "I was trying to make the banter as good as the songs," he says. "Then I realized that the stories that I'd started to tell *between* songs demanded better or different songs, so I kept writing new ones and more new ones. And the songs that were on *The Bridge* sort of fell away, and I began writing *The Lion*."

Soon after, in 2013, Scheuer met Sean Daniels, who is now the Merrimack theater's artistic director. They formed a fast friendship and began shaping *The Lion* into a full musical, developing an outline for the show based on mythologist Joseph Campbell's theory of the "Hero's Journey." By the end of the week, the two had written the

"Benjamin is dangerously honest. It's so comforting when somebody just goes ahead and tells the truth."

beginnings of many of its songs, including "Cookie Tin Banjo," "When We Get Big," "White Underwear," and the deeply emotional "Dear Dad."

"Sean said to me, 'Hey, you like to write postcards. Have you ever written a postcard to your late father?'" Scheuer recalls. "Then I started crying, and Sean got really concerned, and went out and bought the most expensive bacon he could find and cooked it for me." Inspired by Daniels's prompt, Scheuer wrote "A Surprising Phone-call" as an imagined conversation between his mother, Sylvia, and his late father. "Will you wish a very happy birthday to the boys?/They must be big at 26 and 28," Scheuer sings. "Now I hear that each of them is playing in a band./I guess

the drum-kit and piano and guitars were really tempting fate./Sylvia, you helped them grow./Please forgive me, love. I never meant to go."

Playing himself at age 14 in another scene, Scheuer expresses his anger at not being allowed to attend a much-anticipated band trip to Washington, D.C., because

of a poor grade in math. In response, the teen pins a note to his father's door, calling him "the kind of man that I don't want to play music with, the kind of man that I don't want to be." Scheuer and his father didn't speak for more than a week—and before they could reconcile, his father died.

The show also chronicles other major life events, like the first time Scheuer fell in love, and his diagnosis of stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2011. In song, he narrates the process of enduring chemotherapy treatments, and the subsequent weight gain, hair loss, depression—and ultimately, a new outlook on life.

"My oncologist told me that as I got better on the inside, I was going to look

Benjamin Scheuer playing one of the six instruments he uses in the course of his one-man musical, *The Lion*



worse on the outside,” he says. “I was horrified and fascinated by this dichotomy, and I thought how interesting it would be to make a visual piece of art out of this.” And so, once a week during his illness, photographer and friend Riya Lerner photographed Scheuer with a medium-format Rolleiflex from the 1970s, resulting in *Between Two Spaces*, a book of 27 black-and-white photographs accompanied by text from his journal. In the book, Scheuer writes: “You can take something, whether it’s an illness, or emotional hardship, or a breakup, and create something out of that: it doesn’t have to be this isolated event that happens to you, but becomes a way

for you to gain control of it, and make it into something new.”

Daniels—who had lost his own father a year before meeting and collaborating with Scheuer—says that working with someone unafraid to examine loss was both terrifying and exciting. “What I always like to say is that Benjamin is dangerously honest. It’s so comforting when somebody just goes ahead and tells the truth.”

In *The Lion*, some of that truth is truly heartwarming—“My father has an old guitar and he plays me folk songs,” Scheuer sings in the show’s opener. “There is nothing I want more than to play

like him”—and some is not, as when Scheuer recounts those fits of rage: “I ask my friend, ‘What do you do when your dad breaks your toys?’” Scheuer recalls in one scene. “And he looks at me like I’m insane.”

Ultimately, for Scheuer, “Songwriting is a way for me to understand what’s going on in my own mind and to be able to share those things with other people. To be able to take the worst things in my life—the things that I feel make me feel disconnected—and use them as connection is just amazing alchemy.”



Visit harvardmag.com to watch two animated music videos from *The Lion*.

What Ails the Academy?

American higher education and its discontents

by JOHN S. ROSENBERG

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of Harvard Yard—or Yale’s Old Campus, Swarthmore’s sloping lawn, or Stanford’s Main Quad—higher education presents a pleasing prospect: lively students; lovely buildings; an otherworldly serenity (most of the time); visible evidence of stability and strength, and the promise of progress and prosperity.

But shift the view. Away

from the elite, selective universities and colleges that host a single-digit percent of American higher-education seekers, the scene changes utterly: soaring public tuitions and student debt; abysmal rates of degree completion; queues for introductory classes and required courses, often taught by migratory adjuncts; fraught battles pitting liberal learning and education for citi-

zenship against pragmatic focus on vocational training; a stagnant or falling rate of attainment among the population as a whole.

The distressing features of this much larger part of the higher-education industry have spawned a critical, even dire, literature that merits attention for its own sake—and because the issues echo in the elite stratum, too. And for those seeking entry to the top-tier institutions, the ever more frenzied admissions lottery has begun to provoke overdue skepticism. Here, with, an overview of some recent books with heft.

MICHAEL M. CROW, former executive vice provost at Columbia, has since 2002 been president of Arizona State University (ASU), at the center of the public-university problem: rising demand to enroll, and plummeting state funds to pay the bills. He has written and spoken indefatigably about important issues. At the forefront is the need to educate the population at large, given that “our success in maintaining excellence in a relative handful of elite institutions does little to ensure our continued prosperity and competitiveness, especially if we stop to consider the disproportionately few students

