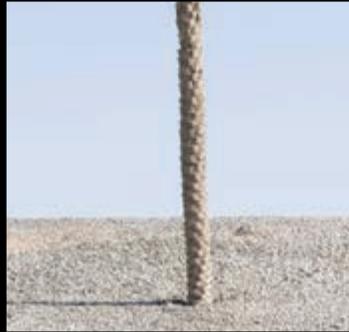
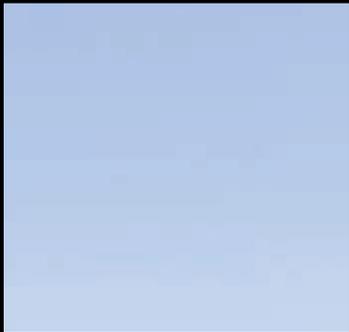


NEA ARTS

NUMBER 1. 2014



OPENING UP THE WORLD

AN INTERNATIONAL LOOK AT ART



THIS ISSUE

Although we are a *national* arts agency, the NEA's artistic vision and impact are hardly limited by U.S. borders. How could they be? Art is inherently fluid, able to cross cultures and affect people regardless of geography, language, belief, or political disposition. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a 2012 speech, art "reaches beyond governments, past all of the official conference rooms and the presidential palaces, to connect with people all over the world."

The NEA has always played a part in spreading art globally, whether through exchange programs we sponsor or grants we have awarded to organizations featuring international artists. We also have been a strong supporter of literary translation, which is featured in this issue, awarding 355 NEA Translation Fellowships since 1981.

Additionally in this issue, we admire the creative talents of Arab photographers, currently on exhibit at Houston's FotoFest, and go on tour with Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante as they introduce U.S. audiences to Brazilian *maracatu* music. We watch as theater shows the plight of those with physical disabilities in Croatia, and we get a director's look at Film Forward, which uses cinema to promote cultural dialogue across the globe. As you read through these stories, we hope you'll see how art can expose our shared humanity even as it provides a window into new perspectives and ways of life.



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(Cover) (In) *Beautification, 1333* (detail), 2011, by Tarek Al Ghousein, part of the FotoFest 2014 biennial
View from Inside: *Contemporary Arab Video, Photography and Mixed Media* in Houston, Texas.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE THIRD LINE

DIRECTOR KIM MORDAUNT grew up on a banana and avocado farm in a sleepy little town in New South Wales. On the weekends, he said, “We’d hitchhike down to town; there would be nothing happening at all. And me and my friends would look around and then hitchhike home and that would be it.” When a film or concert or circus did pass through, it was an occasion, a chance to get a glimpse beyond their quiet corner of Australia. “I’m from a place where we were hungry to meet people and to share our stories, and to get their stories as well,” he said.



THE LAO POINT OF VIEW

Making Connections through Film Forward

BY REBECCA GROSS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM GREENWOOD © RED LAMP FILMS

This hunger for narratives led Mordaunt to a career in film, first as an actor and now as a director and writer. His debut feature film *The Rocket* (2013) takes place in Laos and tells the story of a little boy named Ahlo whose family believes he brings bad luck. He is blamed for a series of unfortunate incidents, including a relative's death and the forced relocation of his family in order to accommodate a new hydroelectric dam. In order to restore his reputation, he sets out to win a local rocket festival with the help of his friend Kia and her eccentric uncle Purple, an alcoholic with a penchant for James Brown.

One of the few films ever made about Laos, *The Rocket* is a rare, gorgeous glimpse into this beautiful yet beautifully complicated country. Though the film did not pass the censorship board of Laos itself, the wider world will be allowed to enter this once closed society as *The Rocket* hits the road with Film Forward, a partnership of the Sundance Institute and the federal cultural agencies, including the NEA, to share U.S. and foreign films with new audiences here and abroad. It also offers filmmakers a chance to present their films outside the traditional festival setting, and instead engage with people who, like Mordaunt in his youth, might have had limited exposure to worlds beyond their own.

"Filmmakers don't make their films for a festival audience," said Meredith Lavitt, director of the Film Forward initiative. "They make their films because they care about an issue, they care about a story, they care about the themes their film is addressing. What Film Forward allows is for those filmmakers to reach the audiences they made the film for." This is accomplished through post-screening dialogues, as well as workshops and master classes taught by the filmmakers.

For Mordaunt, the film was made as much for the people of Laos as it was for international viewers. Although fictional, the film drew on years of research acquired during the production of *Bomb Harvest*, Mordaunt's 2007 documentary about an Australian bomb disposal team in Laos. During the Vietnam conflict, the U.S. launched an aggressive aerial campaign on Laos as part of its Communist containment policy, averaging what a 2008 *Guardian* article described as "one B-52 bomb-load, every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, between 1964 and 1973." Laos remains the most heavily bombed country in history, and undetonated explosives continue to litter the nation.

As Mordaunt's crew filmed the documentary, they came across children who collected bits of bombs for scrap metal, and saw the forced relocation of traditional communities as foreign companies came in to exploit the country's resources. He learned about the deep

"Filmmakers don't make their films for a festival audience. They make their films because they care about an issue, they care about a story, they care about the themes their film is addressing."



The cast of Kim Mordaunt's debut feature film, *The Rocket*, one of the participants in the initiative Film Forward.





Director Kim Mordaunt (right) with Sitthiphon Disamoe and Loun-gnam Kaosainam, both actors from his film *The Rocket*.

suspicions and folklore of Lao people, their sense of humor, and their persistently positive attitude despite decades of war and poverty. He also learned of the rocket festivals, which traditionally involved shooting rockets into the air to ask the gods for rain. In recent decades however, Mordaunt said these festivals have taken on a cathartic element as people shoot back into a sky that rained bombs on them for so long.

Although most of these scenarios didn't make it into *Bomb Harvest*, they began to gnaw at Mordaunt. He had fallen in love with Laos and its people while filming his documentary, and he sensed their stories were ones that needed to be told. "[*Bomb Harvest*] producer Sylvia Wilczynski and myself thought, 'We have to continue this relationship,'" he said. "It's something that doesn't leave you. It gets into your belly and you get back home in Australia here in our very complacent, great life, and you can't stop thinking about it."

These nagging narratives were encouraged by the Lao community, which was eager for Mordaunt and

Wilczynski to make another film. There was a caveat however: this time, it was requested that the film be told from a Lao point of view, with Lao protagonists, and filmed in the Lao language. Initially, Mordaunt said, "The idea of making *The Rocket* was daunting and terrifying," especially since he isn't fluent in Lao. But without a developed Lao film industry, those he had worked with on *Bomb Harvest* told him, "If you guys aren't going to make this film, we're not sure who else will."

So he and Wilczynski were back at it, using the trust and relationships they had built during *Bomb Harvest* to visit more than a dozen traditional communities, speaking with families and consultants in order to learn about the people they would portray. Because they were telling a story that was not their own, "We definitely felt a huge responsibility," said Mordaunt. "I kept rewriting the script. Every time I showed it to the cast, or to a consultant in the region, or anyone in the region, if anything came up that we thought wasn't accurate, I would rewrite. It was a long period of



consultation and rewriting and rewriting until we felt like we'd got something that was accurate but cinematic and hopefully would entice an audience into this place they'd never been."

Their efforts appear to have paid off. *The Rocket* has won a slew of awards at international film festivals, including audience award for best feature at the Sydney Film Festival, best first feature at the Berlin International Film Festival, and best narrative feature and audience award for most popular narrative feature at the Tribeca Film Festival. As part of Film Forward, it will now move beyond this festival circuit and into communities that may have never heard of Laos, let alone know its war-ravaged history or its contemporary concerns.

And yet, there is still much to recognize. At its heart, the story is about a dysfunctional family struggling to forgive and forget, "something I think that any family can understand," Mordaunt said. It is the story of the underdog, of friendship, and of resilience in the face of adversity. Many communities, too, will identify with the film's themes of displacement, particularly those who may have immigrated or were forced to move due to regional conflict.

This spring, Mordaunt will be presenting *The Rocket* at Film Forward events in Pennsylvania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, both of which were chosen because of their connections with the film. As with Laos, Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced a long and brutal

civil war, whose legacy is also perpetuated by live land mines and unexploded munitions. Pennsylvania, which has a sizable Lao community, has another, more surprising connection. Mennonites, a religious sect with large populations in Pennsylvania, have played an active role through the years in clearing cluster bombs in Laos and educating international leaders about the dangers of these unexploded "bombies."

"One of the beauties of this program is it has this amazing grassroots element," said Lavitt. "You can dig in and say, 'What are the ways we can make this film relevant to the communities where we're bringing it?'"

For his part, Mordaunt—a long way from the sleepy little town he grew up in—simply wants to share his art with others, hoping they have the sort of experience he was seeking when hitchhiking into town as a child. "I'm just hoping that the film connects with people, and that it's an emotive response. That's all you can hope for," he said. 🌱

UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS

The way in which a community connects with a film is often unexpected, as was the case with a recent Film Forward screening of *The World Before Her* in Mississippi. The documentary weaves back and forth between two sets of girls in India: one attending a beauty boot camp as they prepare for the Miss India pageant, and the other attending a training camp run by militant fundamentalists.

"The filmmaker [Nisha Pahuja] realized how parallel her film was to audiences in Mississippi," said Meredith Lavitt, director of the Film Forward initiative. "There was so much between the theme of beauty in her film and the Southern belle, and this idea of women feeling oppressed in their roles in the South and in India—this desire for freedom and voice and empowerment."

(Left) The cast of *The Rocket* with director Kim Mordaunt and producer Sylvia Wilczynski.



“If you guys aren’t going to make this film, we’re not sure who else will.”



VIEWED
THROUGH
AN
ARTISTIC
LENS

FotoFest's 2014 International Biennial

BY PAULETTE BEETE



For most of us, souvenirs of our travels abroad might include a postcard or two, and perhaps some local delicacies carefully packed in our suitcases. Photographers Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin, however, returned from a 1982 visit to Les Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France with a somewhat unusual souvenir: the desire to start a photography festival of their own. They followed through, and today FotoFest has become a six-week biennial event held in more than 100 venues around Houston, Texas, including museums, galleries, artist spaces, and corporate and retail sites. Celebrating its 15th iteration this year, the event regularly draws a crowd of more than 280,000.

In many ways, Watriss and Baldwin have sought to replicate the energy and feel of Les Rencontres d'Arles. "There was a central meeting place in the [city] square where you could meet people from all over Europe that were in the field," said Watriss as she remembered her experience at the event. "They had this very informal sort of meeting that photographers could have with important curators who [were] interested in looking at new work or work they didn't know....It was a way to engage in that dialogue with intelligent people about artwork and about the field, and we thought that was a very exciting idea."

The pair was particularly struck by the festival's global feel; Europe was well-represented, of course, but artists also



FotoFest co-founders Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss. PHOTO BY JULIE SOEFER

“The Middle East has never been isolated in its history; it’s been an amalgam and cross current of civilizations and movements and systems.”

attended from as far away as Japan. According to Watriss it was a stark contrast to American art shows at the time. "The photography world—and to a great extent much of the art world—in the United States was very U.S.-focused, and the big institutions were not regularly looking abroad for work to juxtapose with U.S. work."

Just a year later, having only recently settled in Houston, Watriss and Baldwin created FotoFest, curating and publicly presenting the first biennial three years later in 1986. The festival itself is a series of events serving a range of participants, including photographers, students, curators, photo agents, and the public. True to the spirit of Les Rencontres d'Arles, FotoFest is decidedly international in scope. Past festivals have highlighted work from Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and China.

"We're extremely interested in international exchange, and in a sense using art to create a language and a bridge between cultures and educate people about different parts of the world, and educate people in the United States about the world outside our own borders," noted Watriss.

This year, the biennial will focus on the Arab world, a region that many Americans might have never viewed through an artistic lens. Taking place from March 15 through April 27, with support from an NEA Art Works grant, the festival will focus on 49 artists from Arab countries, such as Lalla Essaydi of Morocco, Hazem Harb of Palestine, and Huda Lutfi of Egypt. The work on display includes not just traditional photography but also digital work, filmmaking, and large-scale installations. "I would not call the majority of the artists strictly photographers," Watriss explained. "They really work across boundaries in all different kinds of ways... Uncovering the breadth and diversity of the work was very exciting."

Although Watriss and Baldwin are still the festival's primary curators, they also work with a small advisory board and, occasionally, guest curators. "Fred and I up until now have done about 90 percent of the decision-making on the focus and scene, and we happen to be two people who have both lived within the diplomatic, the academic, and the journalistic worlds," Watriss said. "We have kind of developed a sort of sixth sense or a nose for interesting things that may be under the radar."

To put together this year's roster of invited artists, Watriss worked with German curator Karin Adrian von Roques, an expert in both classical Islamic art and contemporary Arab art. The team also took inspiration



Harem Revisited #36, 2012, by Lalla Essaydi of Morocco. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

from a 2005 festival of Arab work in northern Holland. (Watriss and her team brought that show—*Nazar*—to Houston, and it later exhibited at New York’s Aperture Foundation.)

Watriss explained that the growing popularity of Art Dubai and a number of successful Gulf state art auctions by Sotheby’s and Christie’s made this a particularly good time to take a more extensive look at the contemporary artists of that region. “There’s a real interest in using culture to highlight that part of the world,” she said.

Art world trends aside, Watriss also maintained that the Arab focus was a good fit for FotoFest because the Arab culture is a global culture and photography is a global medium. “The Middle East has never been isolated in its history; it’s been an amalgam and cross current of civilizations and movements and systems,” she said. “They’re not isolated people by any measure or means so they’re dealing with large issues that go across many cultures.

“But at the same time they’re dealing with those issues relative to their own

realities and their own world that they live in,” Watriss continued. “In terms of the way they use the medium and the approach and nature of thought, it’s global. They’ve taken from all kinds of sources. They take whatever is stimulating.”

As with each biennial, Watriss and Baldwin hope to turn the spotlight on artists who may not have had wide exposure for any number of reasons, such as geography or regional politics. While they are committed to presenting museum-quality work, Watriss said the event prioritizes “art that

FOTOFEST PORTFOLIO REVIEW

In addition to the exhibits, an integral part of the festival is the portfolio review, which is available to any photographer by application. Co-founder Wendy Wantriss explained: "The idea of the portfolio review is to put artists who feel they need greater contact with important people in the field or people that can affect their careers in contact with those people.... It's helped thousands of artists. And it's made for changes in photography collections...along with exhibiting practices."

Since 2008, a student observation program has allowed young arts administrators from Texas University to sit in on the portfolio reviews. Wantriss added, "It's quite an extraordinary insight into the operations of the art world and what an artist needs to do to present work and present himself or herself [and to hear] what curators or publishers or photo reps are looking for."

Additional public educational programs include workshops, book signings, conferences, a scholarly volume on the exhibit, and Literacy Through Photography, where students from more than 25 local schools visit FotoFest exhibits, learn how to "read" a photograph and do a series of photographic activities themselves.

has not made it to the mainstream critical and aesthetic markets or communities in the art world. [The goal] is to really broaden and level the playing field, not to reduce standards or criteria but to actually just open up the world."

When asked what she wants visitors to take away from this newest iteration of FotoFest, Wantriss returns to the idea that inspired the festival: art as a means of communication.

"There is an enormous amount of very high-level creativity and creative art-making going on in those countries," she said. "[I hope] there will be a greater interest, appreciation, and understanding for the Arab history and culture in the world as it is."

Art's ability to educate and enlighten across cultures is very much at the heart of FotoFest's mission. It is about exploring ideas, from challenging stereotypes, to technology, to post-colonialism, to what it means to belong to a global diasporic community to the environment. "[FotoFest is a] platform in which there's an interrelationship between art and ideas, what we consider to be important social or civic ideas," said Wantriss. "We feel that art is very central and what artists have to say is very central and important in terms of understanding realities and societies in the world." 🌱



(Above)
(In) Beautification, 1333, 2011, by Tarek Al Ghousein, a Kuwaiti of Palestinian origin.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE THIRD LINE

(Left) Cactus Walk (detail), 2013, by Huda Lutfi of Egypt.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

A New Rhythm

Southern Exposure Brings Maracatu to the U.S.

BY PENNIE OJEDA



Brazilian *maracatu*? So what is this? A rare bird? Exotic fruit? Tropical plant? While Brazilian samba is a popular musical form listened and danced to in living rooms and clubs across the U.S., few of us have heard the charged, driving, percussive rhythms called maracatu, which hails from northeastern Brazil.

For those of us without a Brazilian connection, there was little chance to encounter the form, let alone witness it live. That is, until the summer of 2013 when audiences in seven cities across the U.S. rejoiced with the music and dancing of Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante.

Founded in 1906, Estrela Brilhante is one of the oldest and most renowned and respected maracatu groups in Brazil and internationally. Led by the legendary Mestre Walter Ferreira de França and Queen Dona Marivalda Maria dos Santos, Estrela Brilhante performs mainly in the streets rather than on stages, with the public mingling freely among and participating joyfully with the musicians and dancers. Their 1996 album *Amazônica* was the first recording of maracatu music, and the group has toured widely in Brazil and abroad to Germany, Portugal, France, and the Netherlands. Until their 2013 engagements however, they had never performed in the U.S.

The grant program Southern Exposure: Performing Arts of Latin America was key to making Estrela Brilhante's tour possible. A partnership of the NEA, Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation (MAAF), and the Robert

Sterling Clark Foundation, Southern Exposure funds consortia of U.S. arts organizations to present exemplary contemporary and traditional dance, music, and theater companies from Latin America to perform and engage with communities across the United States.

As is common for international projects, the Estrela Brilhante U.S. tour had a long incubation period. The roots for this particular project date back to 2001, when Brooklyn-based percussionist and bandleader Scott Kettner spent a year in Brazil learning and living maracatu music. His recently published book, *Maracatu for Drum Set and Percussion*, explains that maracatu is much more than a rhythm; it is a lifestyle in which the practitioners, even in the 21st century, are steeped in the tradition of their forefathers. The musical form goes back to the colonial period in Brazil when African slaves copied (and mocked) the pageantry of the Portuguese monarchy by creating their own court of elaborately costumed royals, complete with a king and queen attended by princes and princesses. Catholicism and tribal ritual converged into new deities that became part of the pageantry that is celebrated in maracatu.

As part of the Southern Exposure grant, Kettner worked with Lincoln Center to create a tour billed as A Tale of Two Nations, which featured Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante along with Nation Beat, Kettner's own U.S.-Brazilian music collective. The joint performing ensemble involved 13 Brazilian Estrela Brilhante musicians and dancers and five Nation Beat musicians and



Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante taking it to the Los Angeles streets as part of the Grand Performances free concert program in August 2013.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ALVAREZ



Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante performing at Silvermine's third annual ArtsFest in New Canaan, Connecticut.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SILVERMINE ARTS CENTER

“Even in Brazil, I don’t think we have ever performed before so many people. It was simply *maravilhoso!*”

vocalists. Whereas in Brazil, maracatu groups range in size from 30 or 40 and incorporate 100 or more drummers and dancers, this collaborative format allowed the visiting maracatu artists to perform in their powerful and dynamic traditional style, complete with the pageantry and procession, using an ensemble of a size that was financially feasible for a range of U.S. presenters.

A Tale of Two Nations premiered as part of New York’s Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival on August 2, 2013, marking Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante’s U.S. performance debut. Maestre Walter led the musicians of Estrela Brilhante and Nation Beat, while Queen Marivalda and her court danced under a royal canopy in their richly brocaded hoop skirts and elaborate headdresses. A diverse and appreciative crowd of 4,000 sang and danced along with the performers in an atmosphere of unbridled energy.

The members of Estrela Brilhante were overcome with emotion. One of the group’s drummers, Marcelo Tompson, who acted as spokesperson, remarked, “Even in Brazil, I don’t think we have ever performed before so many people. It was simply *maravilhoso!*”



Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante's Mestre Walter Ferreira de França leads a workshop with Maracatu New York students in Brooklyn.

PHOTO BY BRUCE WALLACE

“At the performance, joy was stamped on their faces.”

A few weeks later, Estrela Brilhante was off to Los Angeles, where they performed as part of the Grand Performances free concert program. Well before the group's arrival however, executive director Michael Alexander and his staff at Grand Performances laid the groundwork to build community interest in maracatu.

In May, Kettner visited L.A. and led workshops for more than 40 professional and pre-professional drummers. To ensure local musicians could experience the true sound of the traditional instruments, Grand Performances identified a Brazilian drum maker based in San Diego and rented authentic maracatu drums for participants, most of whom had never seen these particular drums, the *alfaias*.

When Estrela Brilhante arrived, they offered a follow-up workshop for drummers and one for dancers, sharing some of their own drums, bells, and costumes. Nearly 200 people participated in the various workshops. The final performance took place in August just before Estrela Brilhante's return to Brazil, drawing more than 2,000 people and including local workshop participants in the vibrant procession that moved from stage to street.

At all of their performance sites, the members of Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante offered workshops and demonstrations to local artists and community members. Perhaps the most compelling outreach experience occurred at Silvermine Arts Center in New Canaan, Connecticut. Months prior to the event, Silvermine staff created a short video about maracatu,

and working with the Norwalk Housing Authority, used it to recruit teens living in subsidized housing to participate in a carnival costume design workshop.

Over a two-month period, a Silvermine faculty member held classes with middle and high school students to design and sew costumes. Once Estrela Brilhante arrived, Queen Marivalda and her princesses worked intensely with the students. On the night before the event, the Queen and her costume crew played the role of fairy godmothers and did some final work to surprise the students. The next day, students found the costumes done up in full pageantry style, with matching tops and headdresses to wear with their decorated skirts. Expecting only to be part of the procession, the students were thrilled to be included in the full performance.

“The engagement with Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante and the Tale of Two Nations had a much-deeper and longer-lasting impact on us and our community partners than we ever could have anticipated,” said Leslee Asch, executive director of Silvermine. She observed that interacting with the performing group's strong and disciplined women was inspirational for the students. Speaking of the Norwalk youth, Tompson of Estrela Brilhante added, “At the performance, joy was stamped on their faces.”

Granted, maracatu has yet to become a household word. Yet, through the month-long inaugural U.S. tour of Maracatu Nação Estrela Brilhante, thousands of Americans across the country had a personal introduction to the music and its cultural context. The visiting Brazilian artists left with feelings of enormous pride and a full heart. As noted by Tompson: “Opening a space [in the U.S. music scene] for maracatu, which until not long ago was overlooked even in Brazil, is priceless.” 🌟

Pennie Ojeda is the former director of the NEA's international programs.

INVISIBLE ART

A Look at Literary Translation

BY REBECCA GROSS

Translation is an invisible art: the better it is, the less you notice it. At the art form's pinnacle, a text reads so naturally that one might not even realize it is a translation at all. Few people, for example, stop to think that well-known phrases such as "all for one and one for all," "ye who enter, abandon all hope," and "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" were originally written in a language other than English (they appear in *The Three Musketeers*, *Inferno*, and *Anna Karenina* respectively). These lines, and the works they are from, have become as much a part of American culture as the culture of their mother tongue.

Yet even with translation's clear importance to cultural life, American translations are exceedingly few. According to the University of Rochester's Three Percent website, only three percent or so of all books published in the U.S. each year are works of translation. When calculating only literary fiction and poetry, this figure dwindles to 0.7 percent, or 517 titles in 2013. Even this paltry amount requires hours of painstaking, time-intensive, and frequently thankless work, overlaid by the anxiety of choosing the correct word, the right tone, and the proper syntax.

Nancy Naomi Carlson is no stranger to these labors of language. She has translated works of poetry by René Char and Suzanne Dracius from French into English, and also serves as the translation editor for the *Blue Lyra Review*. Her latest project, supported by a 2014 NEA Translation Fellowship, is the translation of Abdourahman Waberi's first collection of poetry.



Abdourahman Waberi's book *Les nomades, mes frères, vont boire à la grande ourse*, to be translated into English by Nancy Naomi Carlson.

COVER COURTESY OF
MÉMOIRE D'ENCRIER

Like his novels, which include *Passage of Tears* and *In the United States of Africa*, the poems in *The Nomads, My Brothers, Go Out to Drink from the Big Dipper* draw on Waberi's experience as a youth in Djibouti, and later, as something of a self-imposed exile based in France. The collection, published in French in 2000 and reissued in 2013, will be published in English by Seagull Books next spring.

Like Carlson's past projects, the translation process for *The Nomads* follows an arduous path. For all her translations, she works with two French-English dictionaries, an English-English dictionary, two online French-English dictionaries, two online French-French dictionaries, and a thesaurus. Her initial drafts include all possible word choices, which she narrows down according to the original verse's style and meaning. Dracius, for example, writes lengthy poems with flowery language and frequent Greco-Roman references; Carlson chose similarly sumptuous English parallels. On the other hand, "Abdou's work is miniature—just like the Republic of Djibouti," Carlson said. "He says a lot with a few lines and very simple words." In accordance, her Waberi translations are written in succinct, unadorned English.

Many poetry translators stop here: conveying the tone and content of a poem is enough. But for Carlson, who studied music and is a poet herself, sound is almost as significant as content. "Without even trying, [French] is so rich in sound," she said, noting that this quality is amplified by a poet's pen. "How can you ignore that?"

For each poem, Carlson creates what she calls "sound maps," color-coded charts that track alliteration,



**Djiboutian author
Abdourahman Waberi.**

PHOTO BY PAOLO
MONTANARO

assonance, and syllabic stresses in the original verse. She replicates these rhythms and sound patterns as best she can, attempting to preserve the poem's musicality. Of course, certain linguistic limitations are unavoidable, which Carlson negotiates with a bit of creative license. "You can't get the exact sound for a line in French," she said. "Many of the sounds—the nasals—don't exist in English, so I couldn't possibly do that. But if I can maybe get another sound pattern going, and maybe it happens to be on this line instead of that line, if it's infused in there, then I've done my job."

Eventually, these words, sounds, and meanings are stitched seamlessly together, ideally creating a text that is at once accurate and beautiful. And yet, "There's always going to be a flaw," said Carlson. No matter how long you might work at it, "It's always going to be imperfect." She invoked a quote by Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko: "Translation is like a woman. If it is beautiful, it is not faithful. If it is faithful, it is most certainly not beautiful."

Regardless, perfection—or at least its close relative—is always the goal. For her Waberi translations, Carlson had a unique advantage in this pursuit: the author himself. When she first contacted Waberi about translating his work, Carlson was unaware that he was a visiting professor at the George Washington University, just a few subway stops south of where she herself teaches at the University of the District of Columbia. As a result of the serendipitous proximity, the two developed a close collaboration as the work progressed. Carlson consulted Waberi on word choice and narrative intention—especially helpful given his occasional use of Somali—and Waberi offered suggestions while trying not to overstep his role.

"It's a question of humility," he said, when asked how it felt to watch his work translated into a language he speaks fluently. When one of his novels was translated into Serbian, he said it was easy to let go; since he doesn't speak the language, he remains blissfully ignorant of whether the translation was up to snuff. His English translations, he thinks, are no different. "Why should I intervene? Because I speak some English?" he asked. "[The translator] is doing his or her job, and I've done mine."

Given the pair's intimate working relationship, Carlson also had a comprehensive primer on Waberi's native culture, which she believes is essential for literary translations. "As a counselor, my job is to empathize and walk in someone else's shoes," said Carlson, who has a PhD in counselor education and has worked in school counseling since 1978. "If you can't [do that], I think it's impossible to translate. I don't feel that people can look at the French, especially in poetry with all the nuances and the lyricism, without understanding



Translator/writer
Nancy Naomi Carlson.

PHOTO BY RACHEL
CARLSON

where that's coming from, without understanding the sparseness of Djibouti. The sparseness of Abdou's poetry represents a sparseness of the desert, the nomadic life, the few belongings, not burdening yourself down with things and traveling light in the world."

Beyond her conversations with Waberi, Carlson made it a point to learn about Djibouti's history, political system, and culture, just as she did with Martinique, where Dracius is from. "I have two PhDs because I love to learn," she said. "I feel like I'm in another course, as I translate, of World 101."

It's a feeling she hopes readers will share as they read Waberi's work. "From my point of view, it's fascinating for an American audience to get a bird's eye view into Djibouti," she said. "Many of them have never heard of Djibouti, let alone know where it is, what the political scene is right now, what the landscape is like. I'm hoping others will go, 'Oh my goodness, how different, how exotic, how sad, how exciting.'"

And perhaps, even, "how familiar." Although international readers might not have direct knowledge of Djibouti, Waberi said his work is more about a shared emotional state than a particular place; the country name, he said, could be swapped with almost any other. "I'm writing from a human condition of displacement," he said. "That is the great experience of this century, how people moved and have this experience of displacement worldwide."

"You go to the deepest core of the text...and you say, 'Come on, we're speaking the same language,'" he continued. "You discover you're not very different." 🌱

élegie pour une mouche à Sony Labou Tansi

Une petite mouche pieuse voletait dans le creux
de mes pensées—d'un violet pâle elle était.
Avec ses yeux phares on aurait dit un taxi-
brousse languissant sur une route cahoteuse.

Assagie par le brûlant souffle du khamsine,
elle vint se coller sur mes lèvres crevassées
travaillées par la soif et la marche effrénée
dans les méandres de l'oubli.

Des petits cailloux et des pierres noires
voilà l'essentiel du paysage!

Après mille souffrances la mouche mourut
sans murmures
un poète aussi l'année suivante.

elegy for a fly à Sony Labou Tansi

A little pious fly was flitting about in the empty space
of my mind—pale purple she was.
With her headlight eyes one would have said a bush
taxi wilting along a bumpy way.

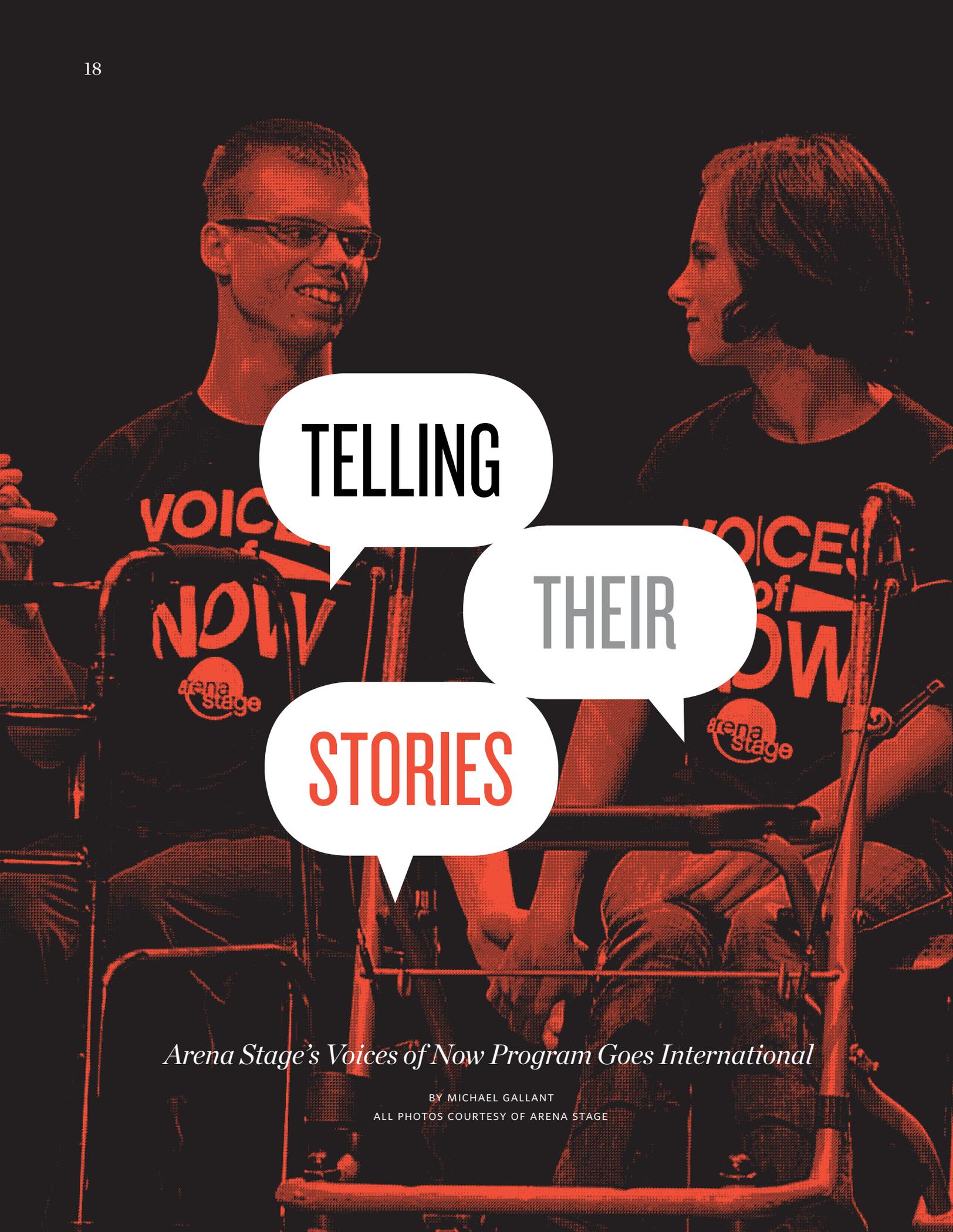
Subdued by the khamsin's scorching blast
she came to land on my chapped lips
wrought by thirst and frenzied course
through meanders of memory lapse.

Gravel and black stones
such is the landscape's essence!

One thousand torments later the fly succumbed
sans murmurs
so, too, a poet the following year.

French version of poem by Abdourahman Waberi from his book
Les nomades, mes frères, vont boire à la grande ourse, (Mémoire
d'encrier, 2013). English translation by Nancy Naomi Carlson.

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TELLING

THEIR

STORIES

Arena Stage's Voices of Now Program Goes International

BY MICHAEL GALLANT

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARENA STAGE

WHEN MAJA POPOVIĆ'S family discovered she had attended a Depeche Mode concert, they responded angrily, stunned that her father had let her leave the house. It wasn't because she was a minor, or that the concert venue was located in a dangerous part of town. It was because Popović, now a 30-year-old PhD student, was born without the lower portion of her legs and uses a wheelchair. In Croatia, where Popović lives, that is reason enough to be kept hidden from the world.



U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Kenneth Merten (middle, with tie) meets Arena Stage teaching artists and Voices of Now: Croatia ensemble members in Zagreb, Croatia.

Popović recently shared her experience with Voices of Now, a program of Arena Stage, located in Washington, DC, that presents performance-based education to those whose voices are not usually heard. “It encourages discourse across lines that are not usually crossed in communities,” said Anita Maynard-Losh, Arena’s director of community engagement. In collaboration with the U.S. Department of State, Arena brought Voices of Now to Croatia in December

2013 as a way to spotlight individuals with physical disabilities, and raise awareness about the discrimination they face.

“As soon as I learned that these wonderful people were coming to our country with such a noble mission of raising awareness about problems people with disabilities encounter every day, I was immediately on board,” said Popović. “There is still much to be done on the subject here, but the idea of addressing people—well, audiences in this case—seemed like a very good start.”

Voices of Now began in 2002 as a collaboration between Arena staff members and DC’s Jefferson Middle School, and has since grown to include partnerships with

other schools and community organizations throughout the DC metropolitan area. “The goal has always been to work with ensembles to create original pieces of theater that were based on their lives,” described Maynard-Losh. “The participants discuss and write around a theme that is significant to them and we, as theater professionals, devise a piece that puts that work into a play that we direct and they perform. For our participants, it becomes a very personal and meaningful process.”

“We never go in expecting to tell a specific story, and we work very hard to avoid putting our voices on top of the voices of the participants,” said Ashley Forman,



Arena's director of education and founder and artistic director of Voices of Now. "Our goal is to share the process of creating theater, share our skills, and let our artists tell their stories and see what conversations come out of it." To that end, Forman continued, talkbacks between performers and audience members follow each show, jump-starting discussions that organizers hope will continue long after the curtain drops.

Arena Stage began its collaboration with the State Department on Voices of Now in October 2012 with a trip to India. "We worked in Kolkata, Patna, New Delhi, and Hyderabad and in each, we created a piece of theater with an ensemble of young people from that area," said Maynard-Losh. "We worked with young girls who had been rescued from trafficking. We worked with 'platform children,' young people who live on railway platforms because they don't have homes. We worked with a group that was made up of Muslim and Hindu young people who wanted to deal with the topic of tradition—how to hold on to what's good about your oldest traditions while integrating what's good about the world outside of them."

Participants also talked about what to do with traditions that they did not want to be part of their lives. "A young boy wrote a piece that was included in the play about how it was traditional not to educate women, and how that was a tradition he didn't want to hold on to," she continued. "It really

Rehearsal for Voices of Now: India senior ensemble members in Chennai, India.

Arena Stage teaching artist Fareed Mostoufi with Voices of Now: India participants in Hyderabad, India.



seemed to be a powerful and life-changing experience for all of the young people who were involved."

Following the success of their first expedition to India, Voices of Now organizers were brought by the American embassy in Croatia to the city of Zagreb for three weeks in December. The American delegation quickly learned that Croatians with physical disabilities were a population that could benefit highly from the attention, and discussion, that the program would bring.

"There are significant roadblocks in Croatia," said Forman. "The challenges are extreme and it's not something that people generally talk about." She recalled Popović's unsettling description of what it was like for those with a disability to live in the country. "She told us that people with disabilities are expected to be kept in the basement and fed bread and water, literally hidden as a family secret. It's a completely different stigma than we're used to dealing with here in the U.S." In fact, it was only last year that disabled individuals who lived under the care of others were given the right to vote in Croatia.

Popović admitted that she was a bit skeptical early on in the process, despite her enthusiasm to participate. "Whenever

“We never go in expecting to tell a specific story, and we work very hard to avoid putting our voices on top of the voices of the participants.”

Croatian news reporters cover a subject such as physical disability, they often approach [it as something] extremely pathetic, making all of us look like social cases in need of alms,” she said. As the creative process continued, though, her doubts were replaced with excitement.

The resulting play, entitled *Disable(d) Prejudice*, attracted an audience that was at least 100 people over capacity for the venue. “The play made me realize how important it is to react when some form of discrimination is being displayed, and how important it is for people to come together and raise their voices in order to change the world they live in,” said Popović. “I think other members of our ensemble would tell you the same thing. As for our audience—all of us were approached by people, days after the show, who kept thinking about the problems we go through and who wanted to know what they can do to help us. People showed support everywhere we looked.”

For Elizabeth Blumenthal, the assistant public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Zagreb who helped organize Voices of Now’s work in Croatia, the public’s response was far more positive and substantial than she had expected. “The theater was standing room only and many people said afterwards that they’d never seen any-



Croatia ensemble members in rehearsal with Arena Stage teaching artist Anthony Jackson in Zagreb, Croatia, as part of the regional theater group’s Voices of Now initiative.

thing like *Disable(d) Prejudice*,” she said. “I know one school group that came that continued to talk about the issues raised in the show the next day in the classroom, not because the teacher led a discussion, but just organically, because they found so much to talk about as a result of seeing the play. That was exactly what we had hoped for.”

Popović hopes to see the positive impact of Voices of Now in Croatia spread to a broader audience worldwide. “Almost every country has a certain problem [accepting] minorities, whether it’s discrimination against people with disabilities, foreigners, even women or racism based on religious beliefs, skin color, sexual orientation,” she said. “Programs like these have a great potential to trigger change not just in a single country, but the whole world.” 🌱

Michael Gallant is a composer, musician, and writer living in New York City. He is the founder and CEO of Gallant Music (gallantmusic.com).

EXCERPT FROM *DISABLE(D) PREJUDICE*

Martina

Ja sam ptica slomljenog krila.
I am a bird a broken wing.

Vidim sunčano nebo i zlatno Sunce.
I see clear skies and the golden Sun.

Pravim se da sa svojim jatom
letim visoko.
I pretend to fly high with the flock.

Pitam se zašto mi ne daju
da letim s njima.
*I wonder why they won’t let me
fly with them.*

Brine me što ne vide moju snagu
i volju, samo moje slomljeno krilo.
*I’m worried that they can’t see my
strength and will, only my broken
wing.*

Razumijem da se boje.
I understand that they’re scared.

i sanjam da će jednoga dana
shvatiti da sam ja ista kao oni.
*but I dream that they will realize that
I’m the same as them.*

Pokušavam im ispričati svoju priču.
I try to make them hear my story.

I nadam se da sam ja zadnja
ptica slomljenog krila koja mora
dokazivati da se ne razlikuje
od ostalih.
*I hope that I’m the last bird with a
broken wing that has to prove that
she is no different.*



ONLINE



As part of our online content for this issue, which you can find by scanning the QR code or visiting [arts.gov](https://www.arts.gov), you can listen to a talk with Chilean saxophonist Melissa Aldana,

winner of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition; hear an audio piece on the State Department's OneBeat program, which brings young musicians from around the world to the U.S. for one-month collaborative residencies;

look at *Kongo across the Water*, an exhibit that will travel throughout the U.S. showcasing African art and its influence on American culture; and read about NEA National Heritage Fellow PJ Hirabayashi and her participation in the U.S./Japan Creative Artists Program.

(Above) Chilean saxophonist Melissa Aldana (left) playing with Jimmy Heath at the 2014 NEA Jazz Masters Awards Ceremony and Concert at Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. PHOTO BY MICHAEL G. STEWART

