

THE WANDERING HERMIT REVIEW

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ART & LITERATURE



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ISSUE # 2: WINTER/SPRING 2006

KLIPSCHUTZ

*In early 1999 small San Francisco theater groups Campo Santos and Word for Word collaboratively staged two stories from Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. (Word for Word adapts short fiction, using the exact text.) The run was a success and prompted an ongoing series of original plays by Johnson; all have premiered through Campo Santos at the 79-seat Intersection for the Arts in the Mission District. Typically, Johnson works with the ensemble pre-production, then pitches in at opening benefits, reading aloud or even acting in a skit if he feels like it. He has become something of a seasoned performer, but on February 6, 1999 he was thoroughly offhand.*

DENIS JOHNSON ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKTHROUGH

The weather outside was ugly, the downpour horizontal enough to make umbrellas beside the point. We were happy to be indoors shaking out of our rain gear as Denis Johnson introduced himself then segued into a quick synopsis of *Jesus' Son*. Its eleven stories follow an unnamed narrator (several times referred to by others as "Fuckhead") from roughly age eighteen to twenty-eight. Johnson then read the story "Work" from the collection, before, after and during which his self-interruptions drew contagious, complicitous laughter. Particularly, the downbeat humor in "Work" came to the fore, on the tongue its droll narrator revealed as an arch absurdist cum clueless mystic. Once Johnson stopped to ask a guy in the front row if he had just spit on him, and if so to ask forgiveness — spitting on a person from the lectern, he further digressed, being one of two recurrent nightmares; the other involved airports.

In another aside, he assured us he does not take his expletives lightly. When his 80-year-old aunt read one of his books, he had waited like a penitent for her verdict. On his latest book's final revision, thanks to his computer's search function, he had assayed and reflected upon each offending instance. That assurance duly made, he resumed where he had left off, backtracking to repeat (in character): "Wow, it made my dick hard! We couldn't stop fucking!"

The above phrase appears in his then-latest novel, *Already Dead* into which he also dipped briefly. He allowed that the book had "gotten away" from him; looking back, he now realized it was an "agnostic" work which lacked a coherent center and a philosophical perspective, and that as a writer he had mistakenly remained neutral, not coming down on any one character's "side."

The capacity small-theater crowd was now his for the taking. He began the question-answer segment by flipping open a small journalist- (or police-) style note pad and asking three or four questions of us, among them how you can go over the speed limit without getting a ticket and the difference between a nautical and land mile. (No satisfactory answers came forth.)

Questions from the audience were uneventful, with the exception of one fellow who picked up on Johnson's expressed dissatisfaction with *Already Dead*, and ran with it. He first asked "what you were up to" in the book—

which Johnson hemmed and hawed over, speculating that the guy was the only one of us who had read it—then pressed on and on, culminating somewhere along the lines of “I enjoyed the ride, but. . .”—at which point the amiable author finally pulled the plug and with the slightest edge of steel in his voice, and a hurt smile, ended the matter: “You aren’t going to start criticizing my book now, are you?”

Thanks to another question, we learned his favorites among his own output are *Angels*, *Jesus’ Son*, and *The Incognito Lounge* (poems). After his reading and remarks, Johnson joined the audience on a mid-level riser where he could be seen smiling, grinning and laughing at the two adaptations along with the rest of us, seeming to revel in and forget that the yarns unfolding before our collective eyes were his own.

Both one-acts — originally the stories “Dundun” and “Emergency” — were wild rides, with the minor quibble that “Emergency” felt a bit long, with a few false endings. That said, it amounted to an embarrassment of riches.

The ‘completist’ word-for-word approach serves Johnson’s direct, apt and impeccably situation/character-specific language magnificently. (From this production I gathered that lines from the stories as staged may be repeated, or given the Greek chorus treatment.) The cast of five was uniformly and individually top notch, each playing multiple characters with verve and authority. Their strange faces and mannerisms seemed tailor-made for the assortment of deluded ’70s screwballs and (in “Emergency”) deadpan hospital workers given three dimensions on stage. Narration, lighting, period music, minimal back-drop, and especially the spacious pauses between given lines brought out — in spades — inherent Burroughsian (think vintage Dr. Benway), Beckettian and downright hilarious qualities not so much lost on the page as too fast-moving there to sufficiently savor in the mind’s-eye. After all, ascending punch lines come and go in print, but when successfully brought to the stage emanate in successions of response-waves — each mini-crash setting up the next slow-curling crest. Not to suggest that Johnson’s writing is essentially comedic, only that the performance showcased this aspect, while his elusive aching existential mystery cut as deep as ever.

A final observation: Having read *Jesus’ Son* more than once, until hearing and seeing it I never realized the extent of Fuckhead’s digressions. This element, which also seemed so much a part of Johnson’s public conversational style, strikes me as one of the secrets to the book, widening and deepening what are on surface short, fragmentary anecdotes into full-throated all-American arias of longing and lostness and lying down and waking up in darkness.