

## <b>Mac Wellman – Damnable Scribbler</b>

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As we exit the sunny Tribeca cafe where I’ve just grilled him on his past, his artistic tenets, and his upcoming play, <I>Hypatia or The Divine Algebra</I>, Mac Wellman, playwright, poet, essayist, semiotic schnauzer, and guru emeritus of off-off wordspew, slips me his business card – “Mac Wellman / Damnable Scribbler.”

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There really is no mistaking that damn Mac-ian scribble. Perverse, elusive, and frantically neologic, Wellman’s texts are damnable because daring, scribble because sincere, and good because inventive. What other living, time-accredited playwright would so equally titillate and pester his listeners by starting things off like this:

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Narrator # 2<br>  
A machine is revealed<br>  
Cries of<br>  
<p>  
Hypatia<br>  
Why why why why why.<br>  
<p>  
Narrator # 2<br>  
No one has heard her<br>  
Cry<br>  
An infinite decimal an<br>  
<p>  
Hypatia<br>  
0<br>  
<p>  
Narrator # 1<br>  
The machine opens revealing a<br>  
<p>  
Narrator # 2<br>  
Unscroll the fabric of people speaking<br>

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Yet that is how <I>Hypatia</I> begins, becoming less comprehensible and more enticing with each damnable scribble.

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<I>Hypatia</I> is ostensibly about the beautiful and brilliant pagan mathematician and philosopher who was ripped limb-from-limb by Christian monks in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In the play, she appears every few centuries bearing a special gift – the ‘zero’ for the inventor of algebra in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the first true machine for the Emperor of Byzantium, and a small toy that she hopes to exchange for a girl’s bicycle in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. If it weren’t for the press release, however, such a summary would not so neatly gel.

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Wellman is, by his and others’ admission, a renegade. Come to NYC in the late 70’s after sauntering in Europe, where his first dramatic junket was a poetic radio play transcribed into Dutch, casting the foreshadow of even he not comprehending his own work, Wellman nurtured a

classical style while absorbing young Shepard and Mabou Mines into his Master's-in-Lit preconscious. Then, in the early 80's, his antique shackles broke:

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"I was very frustrated just with writing, so I got a legal pad and I decided to write one page of bad writing every day...and I did for two and a half years...ungrammatical, vague, disordered, everything...I thought I'd explore the downside...and what I found in doing this is that there were all these interesting rhythms...very expressive, very speakable...full of ideas, and I found actually that this mysterious kind of narrative would emerge from it. It was not disordered at all. In fact, it was quite the opposite."

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From this burst of gut and ear came two seminal shows, <I>Cellophane</I> and <I>Terminal Hip</I>. Wellman got on the map by stepping off the planet. Since then there have been numerous plays, scores of poems, theater creeds, and even a Wellman Fest. It now seems possible, and highly deserved, that Mac will be seen as one of the most innovative literati of our time.

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And this prognostic fame is primarily due to his genre-romping through the hodge-podge of cultural characters: smart-ass yahoos, arch-ego politicians, praeternatural psycho-gnomes, dyslexic philosophers, tiny girls, big jerks, and normal folks on abnormal trips, all inhabit his clowny world, ever yacking up an argot of cowpoke, nasty, dream-life, objectivist rant.

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Many equate Wellman with a group of poets called The Language School, of which Stein, Zukofsky, Coolidge, Ashbery and others are forebears and members. Put simply, this squadron of lexical rebels uses words as objects, defying the gravity of grammar in order to chuck them past the maze of meaning, with the goal of making new thoughts through new sentences.

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Such is what Wellman drags on the stage, igniting the options between action and speech. And it is in the sensation of this process – the verbal rarefaction, the atom-smashing of senses, the resulting protean pow! – that is so exhilarating about Wellman. As rolting is to the deep muscle, as nasal flossing is to the back throat, as fasting is to the tiny tributaries of the major intestine, so is the hearing of a Wellman text to the forgotten neuronal canals of your simian brain. You leave the theater talking, thinking, dreaming differently.

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There's no denying, however, that mom and dad (unless you're the unfortunate offspring of Foreman and Manheim) probably wouldn't love Wellman, as most folks don't enjoy their grammar garbled. Yet, despite the dubious post-modern claim that we are all ethically obliged to enjoy grammar-garbling in order to be disassociated from fascism and commerce, there are several things for syntax-addicts to like in Wellman as well: lotsa laughs, often songs, sublime wit, and, usually, unusually fine design.

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Two chances are occurring this season to tempt the thing itself: <I>Dracula</I>, directed by David Karl Lee, is being remounted by the 78<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre Lab, and <I>Hypatia or the Divine Algebra</I>, directed by Bob McGrath, comes to us through a co-production of Soho Rep and Ridge Theater. And though it's never a breeze to see a Wellman piece, it is always brief, as the playwright believes "no play should be longer than an hour and fifteen, since there is a limit to our attentions." So, have no fear. Paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan paraphrasing Bertrand Russell

explaining Einstein's theory of relativity - it's easy to understand if you completely reformulate your imagination. Damnable scribbler, indeed.