

# Woodstock Times

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## Fringe mounts world premiere of *The Punishing Blow* by Randy Cohen

by Tad Wise

The longest running, most successful American one-man-show in recent memory remains "An Evening With Mark Twain," wherein a make-up artist assisted Hal Holbrook in keeping alive the caustic wit of our first and foremost comedic writer. The appearance of that actor in a battered suit with white mustache and ubiquitous cigar, insured that several tall tales and a hundred or more jokes (with slow fuse and fast) would survive the vampiric glow of the television and the sub-standard it set. What that "Evening" lacked was dramatic tension; nothing was hidden, later to be revealed. There was little if any arc. The Twain canon provided the fireworks, at once risqué and old-fashioned. It was "entertainment for the entire family," if politely outspoken.

Since then several factors have conspired to make the one man (or woman) play a staple of the American stage. 1) It's cheap to mount and mobile; 2) It thrives on our undying devotion to "the cult of personality," (assuming the show is performed by or is about a famous individual); 3) Both comedians and certain "monologists," have enjoyed a stubborn popularity on these shores, and by blurring the line between gag-fest and performed memoir such "solo flights" remain a good bet at the box office; 4) the lone-figure-on-a-bare-stage is a high-wire-act-without-net which lures the actor's ego as a flickering flame lures the moth; hopes for standing ovations and reviews that begin or end with the words "a tour de force," cast an all but irresistible spell upon playwright and performer, alike; And 5) lastly, sadly: the English language used beautifully, thoughtfully and extensively by an American speaker has, itself, become a noteworthy rarity. So ANY prolonged performance accomplishing these becomes an important, memorable event. The question however remains: is it a play? Or the walk-and-talk of an endangered albeit eloquent species?

The problem with Twain or Emily Dickinson or John Barrymore or even Huey P. Newton standing on stage and yakking at us, is that it's all them. Like watching Federer hit a ball against a backboard - incredible an athlete as he may be - we miss someone else's involvement. A foil. The performance is boxed

in. For this reason, the one man show must in fact be a tour de force or fall flat.

So, armed with prejudices both for and against, Thursday, August 21, I attended the world premier of *The Punishing Blow*, the much-awaited first full length play by Randy Cohen, several time Emmy-winning writer for "Late Night with David Letterman" and "TV Nation," best known for his decade long stint (so far) as the "Dear Abby," of the Ph.D. set, whose "The Ethicist" column for the New York Times Magazine has taught the most litigious society on earth how to be good or be gone. The fact that the playwright's comments after the play were as hilarious as they were enlightening should not figure into this review. I will eventually comment on one of his comments, however, for the simple reason that I don't have the self-discipline not to.

Randy Cohen does cast a shadow long enough to invite popular curiosity, certainly by Woodstock standards. Notoriety factor: he's engaged. The play's subtitle, "An Illustrated Lecture Delivered By Order Of The Orange County Criminal Court," is the mainspring (there are several) on the trap of the show; and it is a brilliant conceit. Who would expect less? This is a professional comedic writer, after all, godchild to Twain.

An unctuous character with Van Dyke mustache and beard, casually dressed in a sport jacket and tie, unhappily yet self-importantly places a pile of books on a table. The most sexually ambiguous name in our language is "Leslie", and this character's name is Leslie. Both he and the actor playing him (Seth Duerr) are brilliant. They know it and, very soon, so will we. But first they disappear again.

Enter Norman Wallace, the founder and artistic director of the Woodstock Fringe, who literally runs onto stage and, with his Jimmy Stewart stammer, explains that we're in for a tremendous treat. He brags that his company has survived six seasons of performing all-original plays. And why shouldn't he? In light of bleak economic forecasts the Fringe's survival, what with its high artistic standards, is nothing less than miraculous. Norman sounds exactly like a proud committee chairperson who's cutting short the local program in light of an important visitor. For the Fringe audience is about to

become the ad-hoc audience of an Orange County lecture series, would we please welcome... and with that Wallace runs back off the stage.

Leslie returns, unbridling himself of a wristwatch which he places face up on a podium (sure sign of a college professor and/or professional speaker), unpacks his already opened water bottle and a few other books, one of them festooned with stick-em bookmarks. He attempts to use the mic on the podium but, instantly frustrated with the lousy sound system, squashes the goose-neck flat. He looks out over his audience with the condescension of a billionaire's butler greeting a sanitation worker. Director Nicola Sheara, herself an accomplished comedian, has nailed the physical comedy tight.

So he begins, unhappily, yet, of course, superbly prepared. His off-stage assistant, Jean, after a botched first slide, augments the lecture with rare archival images. Leslie is an esteemed professor who demands our input, employs the Socratic Method. Here, gratefully, Randy Cohen punches a hole in the box of the one man show. We're volunteering guesses. There's give and take as we settle back for a masterful dissertation on the life of Daniel Mendoza [1764-1836], the pugilist, a bare-knuckle virtuoso, who weighs in as number 82 of 100 of the most important Jews in history. Some of us might not have paid sufficient attention to the subtitle of "The Punishing Blow" but are quickly brought to attention when we hear him grumble to himself, "I should have taken the jail time..."

Bingo! The first of several personal revelations slips out. Leslie is lecturing on the particulars of 18th century English anti-Semitism in lieu of a jail sentence. We're informed that Jew-bating was as popular a sport as cock-fighting or bear-bating. An hour later, the personal, very personal, and professional history of Mendoza foremost in our memory, we learn that Jew-bating disappeared from popular London around the time of Mendoza's death. Why? Because following the example of this reluctant Terminator, young Jews learned to box so well that their tormentors were, for a few years anyway, "discouraged", to say the least. Betwixt and between the highlights of this history, we learn the particulars of Leslie's crime; that it involved alcohol abuse, adultery, academic in-fighting, and anti-Semitism. These elements are layered with Nabokov-like intricacy in and around the story of Mendoza's rise and fall. Leslie hates boxing (despite his expertise on the subject), and he uses the figure of embattled figure Mendoza to defend his own bigotry. These are but a few of contradictions which whirl and war throughout a magnificent feat of oratory. It doesn't all make perfect sense, but then Leslie is on the edge of coming apart in a highly erudite sort of way. He goes as far as to sing

(suspiciously well) a historical ditty recounting the most famous battle of Mendoza and his one time mentor. We are even privy to some Hunter Thompson-like images borrowed from the camera on the arresting officer's dashboard, which the technician slips, unscripted, into the slideshow.

We learn, a little too late, that a key player in the plot is actually a witness to our play. Leslie makes numerous comments about "the beloved spouse" but we don't know that "the beloved spouse" and the technician who includes these acutely embarrassing slides are one. Had this been clear earlier, Leslie's monologue would have been transformed into a dialogue - at least in so far as another character would have been listening, adding freight and color to Leslie's outpourings.

Another difficulty is that Leslie is a jealous husband, and the reputation of "the beloved spouse" is eventually knocked around wildly even as Leslie's masculinity is only doubted by us - never by him. This allows "our man" to have the last word a bit too easily. Lastly, and this is possibly no one's problem but my own: for such an eloquent, liberal, highly educated, art-mongering and effete gentleman as Leslie to pass himself off as an anti-Semite of the permanent sort, rather than as the consequence of an isolated jealous, drunken rant, points out either a flaw in my imagination, or in the play. I could never completely buy this one aspect of the set-up. But that's nit-picking. The fact is, this play is an artful, aching comedy tinged with anger and sadness. That the historical seed becomes a mite overgrown is perfectly in keeping with the obsessive character of the visiting professor. As Leslie, Seth Duerr is nothing less than superb. His performance is a feast. The Punishing Blow is a magnificent assemblage of history and brilliant dysfunction, a tour de force for actor and playwright alike. But it was provident to perform its premiere in the provinces. It needs one more draft before New York, New York.

Randy Cohen might not want to hear that, since as - the king of candor - he was kind enough to confess at the Q & A following the performance: "I don't really want your criticism, as much your praise." Twain might have said the same thing. But my sense of things is that what The Ethicist really wants is anything he can get that will make this work an even stronger theatrical event