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Editorial

As the World Burns, Berkeley Fiddles

By Becky O’Malley

Last week a reader asked why the Planet wasn’t covering the disaster in Japan. We responded that our focus was local, and that there are better sources to check for international news. We’ve done a modest story about local fundraising efforts, which have been numerous and well-covered in almost every Bay Area publication. But it’s hard to ignore the international news, both about Japan and about what is loosely called the Middle East. And then there’s the news from the Mid West, specifically Wisconsin but also Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and more—popular uprisings are everywhere, and where they will lead, we still don’t know. Meanwhile, California is falling apart as we watch, and Berkeley’s part of the debacle.

It’s hard to keep in mind that world upheaval is not exclusively the curse of the first decades of the twenty-first century. Or more precisely, that upheavals and disasters have always taken place around the world—what’s new is that because of the speed of modern communication news everywhere is present everywhere, all the time. It’s
cooperation to place just the minimal, basic
taxes to keep the state more or less afloat
on the June ballot. Jerry and I have had our
differences from time to time over the years,
but he’s 100% right on this one and the op-
oponents are completely wrong. And as much
as I applaud Jean Quan’s mayoral victory,
Jerry’s right and she’s wrong on ending
redevelopment too.

It won’t be as dramatic as tidal waves or
hand-to-hand street combat, but for the lives
of affected Californians the funding cuts
which are on the table if public money is
withdrawn are just about as catastrophic (an
overused word, but that’s what it would be).

A down to earth example: There’s a
proposal to cut funding for group homes for
learning disabled people. We happen to have
a friend we’ve known for a long time, a man
named Terry who used to ring doorbells all
over Berkeley, including ours, asking for
money when he was using drugs and sleep-
ing outside. He was pleasant and polite, but
unable to read and definitely in trouble.

Somehow he connected with a program
for adults with learning deficits. He’s now
off the streets and off drugs, living happily
in a group home in Fremont, actively partici-
pating in Special Olympics, and in general a
big success. Do we want to put him back on
the Berkeley streets? I don’t think so—but it
could happen.

And how is Berkeley dealing with this?

Well, last night’s Berkeley City Council
meeting marked an all time low in a long run
of embarrassing performances. The mayor’s
behavior as chair, shouting down polite in-
quiries from councilmembers Arreguin and
Worthington about what was on the table
for a vote, was inexcusable as usual—if you
don’t believe me, watch it yourself.

The environmental impact report and zon-
ing amendments on West Berkeley changes
designed to support mega-developments
were rammed through without discussion by
the mayor’s clique, no surprise there.

Regarding the social services cataly-
sm which faces Berkeley (looking at a $12
million deficit) just as it does the rest of
California, the council majority arrogantly
chose, once again, the ostrich position, de-
terminedly sticking their heads in the sand.
Worthington, Arreguin and Councilmember
Max Anderson offered a thoughtful resolu-
tion suggesting how the state should be
allocating its reduced budget to help cities
like ours: no-brainers like cutting prison
expenditures to benefit social services. Their
fellow councilmembers refused to give them
as much as the time of day, saying piously
with much wriinging of hands that they were
so worried about Berkeley they just couldn’t
think about the rest of the state, too bad,
sorry.

Don’t they know that it’s all intercon-
ected? How could they not understand that
if people like Terry are thrown back on the
streets by the state they’ll soon be back in
Berkeley for us to deal with?

Oh, but not to worry. We’ve just learned
from a Berkeley Chamber of Commerce
press release that the perennial “solution”
for problems of people who live on the
streets is back again. The goal? “…making
the city’s commercial districts more vibrant
places in which to do business.”

Once again, we’re ready to cure down-
town Berkeley’s multiple deficiencies by
banning unsightly people from sitting or ly-
ning on sidewalks. Apparently the deal has al-
ready gone down, if you believe the release:
All that remains is writing and passing the
ordinance, small details if you know you’ve
already got the votes in your pocket.

We won’t need to worry, will we, about
storefront vacancies caused by the exorbitant
downtown rents demanded by commercial
property owners who are land banking for
tax advantages.

We needn’t be concerned about looming
vacant apartment complexes like the unfin-
ished Arpeggio, a huge monument to bad
planning and speculative greed.

And no one should blame the shortage
of parking for downtown’s problems, since
we’re all praying that reliable mass transit
will arrive some day soon, aren’t we?

Not to mention the international econo-
my…

Just blame downtown doldrums on needy
street people, that’s much easier—there’s
sure to be plenty of them around to take the
hit as state and city support services van-
ish. Our very own tsunami, ready to engulf
Berkeley—wait for it.

But how will we pay for prosecuting folks
for sitting down downtown? Let’s just save
that for another day, shall we?

News

The Public Eye:
Understanding Berkeley’s
Budget Woes

By Zelda Bronstein
Thu Mar 24 08:52:00 -0700 2011

Berkeley’s deteriorating finances were
the subject of the council’s work session
The proceedings should make citizens sad and mad. Sad, because the people who will be hit the hardest by the $12.5 million deficit forecast for Fiscal Year 2012 are among those in our community who are most in need of support—the aged, the mentally ill and the poor. Mad, because City officials blamed the looming debacle wholly on “outside forces,” when in fact the budget crisis results in good part from their own fiscal imprudence.

First, a few more numbers. According to the staff report, the $12.5 million shortfall has two parts: a $3 million deficit in the general fund and a $9.5 million deficit in so-called special programs—specifically public and mental health, refuse, clean storm water, the permit service center and federally funded programs. In addition, the housing department currently faces non-structural funding losses of $9.9 - 1.5 million. And this is just for 2012; in 2013 revenue sources are likely to shrink further.

The upshot is that for the first time, real layoffs may occur. In the last two years, 130 positions have been cut, but those were vacant. In Fiscal Years 2012 and 2013, the City is expecting to eliminate 96 more positions, including 51 that are currently filled. The largest cuts are planned for health services and public works, which stand to lose 24 positions each. Even the police department will lose 19 positions, though almost all of those losses will be accommodated by not filling the department’s current 20 vacancies.

The loss of personnel will inevitably diminish city services, though exactly how was largely impossible to tell from the job numbers in the written staff report. The only specifics offered there dealt with the housing department: the West Berkeley Senior Center will be converted to a supportive services hub; the weatherization program will end in January 2010; and community agency contracts will be affected in ways to be detailed in April.

Some of the blanks were filled in by the department heads. Police Chief Meehan, for example, said that the police department would lose its crime analyst FTE, but that an officer would be moved into that indispensable job. Health Services director Beth Meyerson said that everyone who comes in for mental health assistance will be seen, but not everyone will be treated. After pointed questioning from Councilmember Arreguin about what kinds of positions were being eliminated, Meyerson explained that most of the mental health staff being laid off lacked a clinical license and could only work under a licensed supervisor, and that hence the department would be filling 4 vacant supervisory positions. That explanation didn’t satisfy Arreguin, who asked if it was appropriate to fund four supervisory slots. City Manager Kamlazar intervened, saying that the current supervisor-to-staff ratio of 20 to 1 is too high. Arreguin demurred.

The news is grim, everyone agreed. But just as troubling as the news was the council and mayor’s apparent inability to grapple with the details of the city’s budget. In his insistent queries about the meaning of the mental health services numbers, Arreguin was the only councilmember who really probed the staff report. His fellow officials on and off the dais mostly indulged in grandstanding—emphasizing, above all, that they were not responsible for the budget mess. “I don’t think anyone in this room contributed to this meltdown,” said Councilmember Maio, “and yet we’re holding the bag....We are not the cause of this. This has been done to us.”

Yes and no. Certainly Berkeley City Hall is not responsible for the Great Recession and the consequent bleeding of federal and state balance sheets—all of which affect the municipal budget. As the staff report indicated, the Obama administration’s proposed cuts in the federal Community Development Block Grant, Community Services Block Grant, Low Income Home Energy Assistance and HOME Investment Partnership programs will all impair Berkeley’s ability to assist the lowest income members of our community. To a lesser but still real extent, economic development in our city will be adversely affected by the elimination of redevelopment agencies and enterprise zone tax incentives that have been proposed by Governor Brown. These proposals have yet to be resolved, contributing to the uncertainty that is making budget planning even more difficult. And then there are the wildly escalating CalPERS rates and health care costs. To cite the staff report: “The rising CalPERS rates alone will increase the City’s costs by almost $7 million over the next two-year period.” “Total health care costs increased over 70% in six years, going from $9.5 million in FY 2005 to a projected $16.3 million in 2011.” Again, nobody in City Hall is responsible for these daunting figures.

But let’s talk about the daunting figures for which our elected and appointed officials are responsible—for example, the City’s 15-year, annual subsidy of UC Berkeley’s use of City services (police, fire and sewers) to the tune of about $13.8 million. That subsidy was established when the council majority secretly approved the agreement that settled the City’s 2005 lawsuit of the school over UCB’s Long Range Development Plan.

How about the $15 million dollar surplus in the City’s Sanitary Sewer Fund (flagged by Barbara Gilbert in another piece in the current Planet), carried from year to year, while our sewers-to borrow an adverb from the staff report—“desperately” need repair?

Or, to turn to the core problem, how about the excessively generous union contracts that the city manager has repeatedly negotiated and the council has repeatedly approved? Contra Costa Times columnist Daniel Borenstein recently noted some of the most flagrant excesses: “a pension plan that allows some workers to collect more in retirement than on the job; overly generous promises of health care coverage for police in retirement; and a ridiculous vacation and sick leave accrual policy that costs the city millions and enables employees to spike their pensions.” These and similarly ill-considered policies have led to the City’s $310 million worth of unfunded liabilities documented by City Auditor Ann-Marie Hogan.

At the Tuesday work session, Councilmember Wozniak indirectly cited Borenstein, referring to the “bad local press” that the City had recently received. The councilmember then raised the possibility of a hiring freeze or a salary freeze; called for ending termination cash payouts; and marked Berkeley’s “very generous” health policies for City staff, “with no deductibles and no premiums.” It was tough talk, but as longtime observers know, Wozniak never walks such talk; he voted for all of those raises and benefits, as well as for the secret agreement that capped UC’s annual payments to the City at $1.2 million.

Nobody else on the dais even talked tough about the core issue of staff compensation. Instead, councilmembers expressed solicitude for the City workers and their families. Councilmember Worthington asked that in the future, union representatives join management at the front table where City staff sit facing the council. That suggestion garnered loud applause from the many City workers in the chamber. Bringing union reps to the table, said Worthington, “won’t solve the problems, but it would be a statement of respect.” Yes, it would, and it’s a good idea.

But what about respect for the citizenry, a.k.a. the taxpayers? Why didn’t anyone invite our representatives to sit at the table? Is this government for the people, or government for the staff? Why doesn’t the council resurrect the Citizens Budget Review Commission, which it eliminated in 2005, and this time give it the staff support that it
Berkeley High School’s Response to Firearms

By Dan McMenamin (BCN)
Thu Mar 24 08:52:00 -0700 2011

School officials are taking several steps to address two separate incidents Tuesday involving firearms on the Berkeley High School campus.

Two students were arrested Tuesday morning after a gun they brought to the school went off in a bathroom, and a third was arrested a short time later for having an unloaded handgun, school officials said.

In a letter sent to parents and the community later that day, Berkeley Unified School District Superintendent William Huyett outlined the district’s plans in response to the incidents.

A special school board meeting is being held March 30 at 7:30 p.m. to discuss student safety, and a parent forum is being held Monday at 6:30 p.m. at the school’s Little Theater.

Berkeley High School principal Pasquale Scuderi is also holding a school-wide faculty meeting this week to discuss the incident and review school safety procedures.

Administrators and other school staff will be meeting with students on campus this week to talk about the consequences and dangers of weapons on campus, and discuss why students are bringing firearms to school.

An anonymous tip line to report weapons on campus has been set up at (866) SPEAK UP, and a text message option will be added soon.

Two additional safety officers will be working at the school until spring break starts April 2, and they may remain on the campus after the break if warranted.

As required by state law, the three students, ages 16 and 17, who were arrested will face mandatory expulsion, school officials said.

No one was injured in either incident.

In the first case, the gun went off in a bathroom near some portable classrooms on the southeast side of the campus. The bullet went through the wall out toward the street, away from the direction of the classrooms.

A custodian heard the gunshot and saw the students leaving the bathroom. They were apprehended after a brief search, during which the campus was locked down, school officials said.

During the lockdown, authorities received an anonymous tip that another student on campus might have a handgun.

Two safety officers escorted the student from class, and found an unloaded handgun when they searched him, officials said.

The incidents marked the third time in three months that police have responded to guns on the Berkeley High School campus.

In an e-mail to parents, Scuderi said Tuesday that “the anxiety this brings to you all is certainly not lost on me and we are more than aware that a third incident of this type warrants a deeper and more comprehensive response to these types of issues and a wider community discussion.”

Foundry Workers Strike to Save Their Healthcare (News Analysis)

Photos and text by David Bacon
Wed Mar 23 11:07:00 -0700 2011

David Bacon
FOUNDRY WORKERS STRIKE TO SAVE THEIR HEALTHCARE

Workers at Berkeley’s Pacific Steel Casting Company are on Strike.

A strike of over 450 workers in one of the largest foundries on the west coast brought production to a halt Sunday night, at Pacific Steel Castings. The work stoppage, which began at midnight, has continued with round the clock picketing at the factory gates in west Berkeley.

Local 164B of the Glass, Molders, Pottery, Plastics and Allied Workers International Union (GMP) has been negotiating a new labor agreement at Pacific Steel for several months. The old agreement expired on Sunday night.

The strike was caused by demands from the company’s owners for concessions and takeaway proposals in contract negotiations. Those include:

- requiring workers to pay at least 20% of the cost of their medical insurance, amounting to about $300 per month per employee.
- a wage freeze for the first two years of the agreement, and tiny raises after that.
- eliminating the ability of workers to use their seniority to bid for overtime, allowing criteria including speedup, discrimination and favoritism.
- “All eight other foundries in the Bay Area have agreed to a fair contract,” said Ignacio De La Fuente, GMP international vice-president.

“Workers at Pacific Steel haven’t had a raise in the last two years, in order to help the company pay for increases in health plan costs. Pacific Steel is now alone among the rest in trying to make its workers give back $300 a month.”

The $300/month would mean an approximately 10% cut in wages for most workers at the foundry.

Joel Soto, a member of the union’s negotiating committee, has worked eight years at Pacific Steel, and has a wife, 2-year-old child and another on the way. Soto said, “We’ve been trying to save money for a house. If we have to give up $300 a month, we’ll have to continue renting. My wife and I both support our parents, and that $300 cut is what we’re able to give them now that they’re old. And with my wife pregnant, we can’t do without that medical care.”

Benito Navarro has ten years at the foundry, and a wife and son. “That $300 is what I pay for my car to get to work. I’m the only one in my family working, so if we don’t have that money, I’ll have to give up the car. But I’d rather eat than drive.”

On both Monday and Tuesday dozens of Berkeley police, with helmets and face shields, shoved and hit strikers as they attempted to help the company bring trucks full of castings out of its struck facility. On Tuesday, one striker, Norma Garcia, who is seven months pregnant, was struck in the

needs to do its work?

Ain’t gonna happen. The last thing Mayor Bates, his council majority and City Manager Kamlarz want is serious scrutiny from the public, especially about the City’s finances. Berkeley citizens are going to have to dig into the budget themselves. Happily, some hardy volunteers are doing just that: their website will be up in a month or so. In the meantime, you can email them berkeleybudgetsos@gmail.com.

Berkeley Union, Berkeley, California
Three Students Arrested for Bringing Guns to Berkeley High Campus

By Janna Brancolini (BCN)
Wed Mar 23 12:39:00 -0700 2011

Three Berkeley High School students were arrested on campus today in two separate incidents for bringing — and in one case discharging — firearms on campus, a school district spokesman said.

Two students were arrested after a gun they brought to the school went off in a bathroom, and the third was arrested a short time later for having an unloaded handgun, Berkeley Unified spokesman Mark Coplan said.

The school was temporarily put on lockdown while officials responded to the incidents, which started at about 8:45 a.m. when a custodian heard what sounded like a gunshot on the southeast side of campus, Coplan said.

The custodian saw two students walking out of a bathroom near some portable classrooms before leaving the campus, so he told a safety officer on the street that he thought the students had been involved with the gunshot.

The safety officer ran after the students while he radioed the safety team and the Berkeley Police Department, Coplan said. The rest of the safety team did an initial campus closure, which involved putting an administrator or a safety officer at each entrance.

The suspects circled around the campus and tried to enter from the other side, but the safety team knew who they were looking for, Coplan said.

The students were apprehended when they tried to re-enter the school grounds, and they were handed over to Berkeley police.

The suspects were interviewed extensively and denied any involvement in the gun’s going off, but at about 11 a.m., they finally admitted dropping a gun on Haste Street, Coplan said.

The bullet had gone through the bathroom wall out toward the street, away from the direction of the classrooms, and nobody was injured.

Meanwhile, when the school was locked down, an unrelated anonymous tip came in that a student on campus might have had a handgun.

Two safety officers escorted the student from class and took him to a detention office where Berkeley police were waiting. The officers searched him and found an unloaded handgun, Coplan said.

All three students, who are 16 and 17 years old, were arrested and taken to Juvenile Hall.

The first two were arrested on suspicion of reckless discharge of a firearm and with possession of a firearm, Coplan said. The third was arrested on suspicion of possession of an unloaded firearm.

Today marked the third time in three months that police have responded to guns on the Berkeley High School campus.

He said officials would use today’s incidents to see what practices can be put into place to prevent firearms on campus, and to obtain information from the students.

“In all three of these incidents, none of them indicated there was intent” to use the firearms, he said. “It was kids showing off guns, and that’s frightening.”

An Examination of the Proposed Sit-Lie Ordinance [for Berkeley]

From the Committee on Government Affairs, Berkeley Chamber of Commerce
Tue Mar 22 20:18:00 -0700 2011

The Future of Education in America (News Analysis)

By Michelle Melamed, UC Berkeley student, assisted by Raymond Barglow. www.berkeleytutors.net
Wed Mar 23 10:54:00 -0700 2011
Twenty, maybe even ten years ago, securing a job in the US economy without a college degree was feasible and commonplace. But as a college sophomore in the twenty-first century, it’s clear to me and everyone I know that higher education is a must. Sometimes even that will not be enough; with competition more intense that it has been in the past, many will be lucky to land even an internship with their college diploma in hand.

However, quality public school education, not only at the college level but in earlier grades too, is becoming widely inaccessible, as the American education system rapidly declines. There have been many explanations of the problems—and of possible solutions—in our no longer so glorified system, but these accounts are often one-sided or mistaken. The “Race to the Top,” for example, stresses the importance of standardized testing and assessment of teachers based on their students’ scores; Davis Guggenheim’s documentary, Waiting for Superman reiterates that unable teachers are the cause of the failing schools and neglects the other issues in the education system.

Both the federal program and the documentary film disregard the link between low-test scores and life in impoverished neighborhoods where students and their beleaguered families are more likely to be impacted by chronic unemployment, homelessness, crime, malnutrition, and other troubles. Study upon study shows that these circumstances negatively influence a child’s ability to learn and to cope both inside and outside a school environment. Many children do not have a fathering or mothering figure in their lives encouraging them to attend school diligently and do their homework. Thus, no matter how able or qualified teachers may be, they typically do not have the resources necessary to overcome the harsh, discouraging situations that so many students face. Assessment and comparison of teachers’ ability to educate, based on student test scores, is manifestly unjust, given that school settings differ so widely. Good teachers are of course essential in education, but cannot be expected to raise the performance level of students in inner-city schools to that of students from wealthier, more resource-rich communities.

We wouldn’t recognize this from the pronouncements issued by “Race to the Top” officials, but learning in American schools is deeply affected by funding levels and access to educational resources. Today’s budget cuts are disastrous to education. When a school is adequately funded, classrooms are not overcrowded; hallways are not dirty and run-down; quality textbooks are provided to every student; personal attention and “interactive tools” help to address the individual problems that children encounter; physical education facilities contribute to students’ health and well-being. These are conditions that enable teachers to effectively and promisingly teach.

Children learn in many different ways, and teachers develop various methods for reaching them. Over-reliance on standardized tests and standardized education enforces a one-size-fits-all pedagogy that is very inadequate to deal with diversity in our schools. Granted, we do need to look at the quality of teaching in the educational system. Sometimes tenured teachers lack either the ability or the motivation to teach well, and that can be a problem. But when a school is failing in its education mission, it’s highly unlikely that this is just the result of the teachers being incompetent.

Tenure served at the turn of the past century to protect teachers and administrators from being fired for irrational reasons, such as (for a woman) getting pregnant. In decades past, the privilege of tenure has indeed been abused; tenure has been given to teachers who have been working in a school for as little as two years. Once a teacher is granted tenure, the process of dismissing him or her becomes very difficult and expensive. Strong teachers’ unions and tenure can inadvertently protect incompetent teachers who are apathetic; Why try or care when you’re (almost) guaranteed lifelong employment?

This is the pressing issue that Waiting for Superman highlights, and that “Race to the Top” aims to address. But the assumptions shared by the documentary and by federal educational policy are flawed. While the film argues that the demise of the educational system in America is due to incompetent teachers, it neglects to point out why many teachers fail to educate effectively. “Race to the Top” proposes to evaluate teachers according to their students’ test scores—a measurement system not used by other nations that provide a good education to their citizens. (Schools in Finland, for example, which has the highest ranking in the world for its public education, scarcely use standardized tests.) The federal program is especially unfair to those dedicated teachers who work in special needs schools or schools serving impoverished, disadvantaged communities.

I recently interviewed California State Senator Loni Hancock, who is active on the Senate Education Committee, to learn her thoughts about education in California. “The emphasis has shifted from how we can help a child succeed to how can we ‘hold people accountable’ for those children who do not succeed,” said the Senator. This recent approach hasn’t improved education, especially in states such California. Teachers are more inclined to “teach to the test,” Hancock pointed out, and there is more drilling, more emphasis on repetitive instruction, and narrowing of the curriculum”, which defeats the aim of helping “young people turn into enthusiastic, life-long learners.”

According to Hancock, the use of student test scores to assess teachers, as mandated by “Race to the Top,” leads to fewer teachers wanting to teach in schools with many low performing children: “It is very intimidating for a young, idealistic, enthusiastic teacher, for example, to be put in a very difficult situation in terms of teaching and then be graded on their students’ test score.” This intimidation discourages young people from entering the teaching profession, which may result in having teachers in our schools who are less capable and less motivated to do their jobs well.

In the interview Senator Hancock mentioned John Dewey, one of the great advocates of progressive education in the 20th century, with whom she avidly agrees: “Young people learn by doing things; Education should be very interactive and ‘hands-on,’ and drilling is the opposite of that.” But as budget cuts diminish resources, and the number of students in a classroom increases, it is difficult for teachers to use creative, personalized teaching methods.

California, moreover, faces an additional hurdle in seeking to fund education, because a 2/3 vote is required in the legislature to pass a state budget. “That is why the state budget is always late!” Hancock exclaimed. There is some hope, however. Governor Brown is more sympathetic to education funding than was his predecessor. And Proposition 25, which was passed
by California voters last November, lowers the legislative voting requirement to pass a budget from two-thirds to a simple majority. Still, as of mid-March, 2011, the California legislature has not agreed upon a budget for the forthcoming year.

There is no question that America's education system is in mortal danger. Senator Hancock believes that the essential responsibility for failing schools lies not with teachers but can be traced back to the lawmakers who slash school funding. To be blunt, money, or the lack thereof, is the underlying factor that causes classrooms to overflow and deprives students and teachers of textbooks, facilities, counseling, and other forms of support.

So what's the solution? Taxing oil companies? Reallocation of money from prisons to schools? Transferring funding from war to education? Or can it just be firing all the "bad" teachers in our schools? Improving education in America is not going to be easy. Reforms are needed that will take all the factors of education into consideration, granting teachers the respect they deserve while recognizing students' birthright to a public education and providing them with adequate educational resources and community support.

**A Vietnamese Immigrant Writes from Fukushima**

*Tue Mar 22 14:12:00 -0700 2011*

Editor's note: This letter, written by a Vietnamese immigrant working in Fukushima as a policeman to a friend in Vietnam, has been circulating on Facebook among the Vietnamese diaspora. It is an extraordinary testimony to the strength and dignity of the Vietnamese spirit, and an interesting slice of life near the epicenter of Japan's current crisis, the Fukushima nuclear power plant. It was translated by NAM editor, Andrew Lam, author of *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres*.

Brother,

How are you and your family? These last few days, everything was in chaos. When I close my eyes, I see dead bodies. When I open my eyes, I also see dead bodies. Each one of us must work 20 hours a day, yet I wish there were 48 hours in the day, so that we could continue helping and rescuing folks.

We are without water and electricity, and food rations are near zero. We barely manage to move refugees before there are new orders to move them elsewhere.

I am currently in Fukushima, about 25 kilometers away from the nuclear power plant. I have so much to tell you that if I could write it all down, it would surely turn into a novel about human relationships and behaviors during times of crisis.

The other day I ran into a Vietnamese-American. His name is Toan. He is an engineer working at the Fukushima 1 nuclear plant, and he was wounded right at the beginning, when the earthquake struck. With the chaos that ensued, no one helped him communicate with his family. When I ran into him I contacted the US embassy, and I have to admit that I admire the Americans' swift action: They sent a helicopter immediately to the hospital and took him to their military base.

But the foreign students from Vietnam are not so lucky. I still haven't received news of them. If there were exact names and addresses of where they work and so on, it would be easier to discover their fate. In Japan, the police do not keep accurate information. The way they do in Vietnam, and privacy law here makes it even more difficult to find.

I met a Japanese woman who was working with seven Vietnamese women, all here as foreign students. Their work place is only 3 kilometers from the ocean and she said that they don't really understand Japanese. When she fled, the students followed her, but when she checked back they were gone. Now she doesn't know if they managed to survive. She remembers one woman's name: Nguyen Thi Huyen (or Hien).

No representatives from the Vietnamese embassy have shown up, even though on the Vietnamese Internet news sites they claim to be very concerned about Vietnamese citizens in Japan - all of it a lie.

Even us policemen are going hungry and thirsty, so can you imagine what those Vietnamese foreign students are going through? The worst things here right now are the cold, the hunger and thirst, the lack of water and electricity.

People here remain calm - their sense of dignity and proper behavior are very good - so things aren't as bad as they could be. But given another week, I can't guarantee that things won't get to a point where we can no longer provide proper protection and order. They are humans after all, and when hunger and thirst override dignity, well, they will do whatever they have to do. The government is trying to provide air supply, bringing in food and medicine, but it's like dropping a little salt into the ocean.

Brother, there are so many stories I want to tell you - so many, that I don't know how to write them all. But there was a really moving incident. It involves a little Japanese boy who taught an adult like me a lesson on how to behave like a human being:

Last night, I was sent to a little grammar school to help a charity organization distribute food to the refugees. It was a long line that snaked this way and that, and I saw a little boy around 9 years old. He was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

It was getting very cold and the boy was at the very end of the line. I was worried that by the time his turn came there wouldn't be any food left. So I spoke to him.

He said he was in the middle of PE at school when the earthquake happened. His father worked nearby and was driving to the school. The boy was on the third floor balcony when he saw the tsunami sweep his father's car away. I asked him about his mother. He said his house is right by the beach and that his mother and little sister probably didn't make it. He turned his head and wiped his tears when I asked about his relatives.

The boy was shivering so I took off my police jacket and put it on him. That's when my bag of food ration fell out. I picked it up and gave it to him. "When it comes to your turn, they might run out of food. So here's my portion. I already ate. Why don't you eat it?"

The boy took my food and bowed. I thought he would eat it right away, but he didn't. He took the bag of food, went up to where the line ended and put it where all the food was waiting to be distributed. I was shocked. I asked him why he didn't eat it and instead added it to the food pile.

He answered: "Because I see a lot more people hungrier than I am. If I put it there, then they will distribute the food equally."

When I heard that I turned away so that people wouldn't see me cry. It was so moving - a powerful lesson on sacrifice and giving. Who knew a 9-year-old in third grade could teach me a lesson on how to be a human being at a time of such great suffering? A society that can produce a 9-year-old who understands the concept of sacrifice for the greater good must be a great society, a great people.

It reminds me of a phrase that I once learned in school, a capitalist theory from the old man, Fuwa [Tetsuzo], chairman of the Japanese Communist Party: "If Marx comes back to life, he will have to add a phrase to his book, Capital, and that 'Communist ideology is only successful in Japan.'"
Opinion

No More Taxes Blues

By Bruce Joffe
Sun Mar 20 11:30:00 -0700 2011

Slip-sliding down the highway,
Storm drains need repair.
School teachers are being laid-off,
Pot holes everywhere.
Working people struggle

To pay to keep their home,
They can’t take another bill,
And so they cry alone,
“No More Taxes.”

Economy is booming In this third world country,
For the richest one percent,
The ones who shout with glee,
“I got mine, and I’ll have yours,
Cause tax don’t bother me.”

“No More Taxes.”
They got lawyers and lobbyists
Who get them off tax-free.
They chosed the size of government,
Cut services we need.

“Don’t tax the rich” is what they mean
When they shout scornfully,
“No More Taxes.”

Republicans support them,
The party of the rich.
Democrats, they go along, Been bought
and paid to switch.

Most of us, well, we don’t vote,
Distracted by Fox news.
Think government can’t be our Force,
And so we sing the blues,
“No More Taxes.”

Berkeley Budget SOS--Fixing the City’s Sewers

By Barbara Gilbert
Mon Mar 21 14:24:00 -0700 2011

Berkeley Budget SOS is a civic organization
dedicated to fiscal clarity, accountability
and sustainability in the City of Berkeley. Of particular concern to us is a complete audit
of the City’s long-term financial obligations
and needs, including those in relation
to the City’s physical infrastructure. We are wondering why our water drainage and sewer system is in such apparent disrepair
given the substantial annual sums of money apparently available.

The City of Berkeley’s sanitary sewer system consists of storm drains and sanitary sewers.

Operation, maintenance, and capital improvements are to be paid with segregated and dedicated funds from two sources: the Sanitary Sewer Fund and the Clean Storm Water Fund. Additionally, under the City’s sewer lateral ordinance, the City has no responsibility for the maintenance, repair and replacement of the sewer laterals serving individual properties—these are 100% the separate responsibility of the owners.

The Sanitary Sewer Fund has revenues of about $14M annually which are collected for the City by EBMUD. This “Sewer Service Fee” shows as a separate line item of the bi-monthly EBMUD bill. The amount charged in Berkeley is based on water usage. A study I conducted in 2006 indicated that Berkeley’s charges for homeowners, businesses and other users was two to five times higher than for users in Emeryville and Oakland. I note that my monthly cost has been about $40 for very moderate water usage.

The Clean Storm Water Fund has revenues of about $2.5M annually and is collected as part of the property tax bill issued by Alameda County. (There is also an annual “in-lieu” payment by UCB included in the $2.5M total). Per City documents (the FY 2011 Mid-Biennial Budget Update), the property tax amount is supposed to be capped at $34 per homeowner property. I note that I was charged $80.52 for 2010-2011, and others I know have also been charged more than the stated $34.00. These monies are to be spent on “the maintenance and improvement of the City’s storm water drainage system”. It is not at all clear why a fund separate from the Sanitary Sewer Fund was necessary. It is also unknown whether neighboring jurisdictions have a similar special water/sewer tax. Now that the City is actually receiving the UC in-lieu payments, the Clean Storm Water Fund is currently in balance.

Despite total annual revenues of about $16.5M and an unspent ongoing surplus of about $15M in the Sanitary Sewer Fund, the City is regularly subject to winter flooding in the flatlands and other areas (including cross contamination of water and sewage), contamination of Aquatic Park water by sewage inflows and Bay backflows, and is still (along with neighboring jurisdictions and EBMUD) in violation of an EPA “clean water” order. Work on our water/ sewer system appears to be largely done on an “as-needed” basis. Residents should be asking how and on what the annual $16.5M is actually being spent, and why a large ongoing $15M surplus has been carried.

Periodically and predictably, there is official talk of rate increases. Under Proposition 218, these rate increases would need to be formally justified by a “rate study” and, at least in theory, voted upon (the “protest vote” method used for the last refuse rate increase was widely seen as a sham). In the past six years, at least two rate studies were commissioned (Brown and Caldwell in 2005 and Harris & Associates in 2006) but no public results were forthcoming (to the best of my knowledge based on searches of
City website and Google). Is it possible that the rate studies did not produce the desired result, i.e. justifying further rate increases?

At this point, Berkeley Budget SOS wants to know:

Why are there two separate funds devoted to the same or overlapping purposes?

How are the annual $16.5 revenues being spent? How much of this has been devoted to infrastructure capital improvements (usually undertaken by outside contractors under a formal bidding process) and how much devoted to the compensation for Public Works employees who ordinarily do maintenance and repair?

What happened to the $15M unspent surplus each year? Was it invested and the interest credited to the Sanitary Sewer Fund or was some amount diverted to other municipal uses?

Why has essential storm drain and sewage infrastructure work been deferred when there has been a large surplus?

What happened to the two commissioned rate studies?

Why are sewer service fees apparently so high in Berkeley relative to our neighbors? Why are these fees based on water usage (which is not necessarily correlated with overall use of the system)?

Why are some Berkeley residents being charged more than the legally-limited $34 annual amount for the Clean Storm Water Fee? Is a similar special tax levied in other jurisdictions?

For the sake of fiscal clarity, accountability and sustainability, Berkeley Budget SOS will be seeking answers. To contact Berkeley Budget SOS write to berkelybudgetsos@gmail.com.

BRT, NIMBYs, and the New York Times

By Charles Siegel
Tue Mar 22 20:44:00 -0700 2011

On March 12, the New York Times ran an article named “Green Development? Not in My (Liberal) Backyard.”

It began by saying, “Park Slope, Brooklyn. Cape Cod, Mass. Berkeley, Calif. Three famously progressive places, right? … But just try putting a bike lane or some wind turbines in their lines of sight.”

Then it pointed out that, in Park Slope and in Cape Cod, residents are suing to stop bike lanes and wind turbines, and “In Berkeley last year, the objections of store owners and residents forced the city to shelve plans for a full bus rapid transit system (B.R.T.), a form of green mass transit….”

The article said that the residents all claimed to have reasons to oppose these projects, “But some supporters of high-profile green projects like these say the problem is just plain old Nimbyism.”

As surely as night follows day, an outraged opinion piece named “Why is the New York Times Bashing Environmentalists?” appeared in the Berkeley Daily Planet objecting to this slur against our city: “the author’s claim that opposition to a full bus rapid transit system on Telegraph Avenue was a function of ‘nimbyism’ is a bald-faced lie. There’s certainly nothing new about the mainstream media trying to find hypocrisy in the most environmentally forward thinking city in the United States, but opposition to that particular BRT route had everything to do with sound transit planning and nothing to do with nimbyism.”

Anyone who attended the meetings about BRT in Berkeley and heard the people involved knows that the New York Times is right and the Daily Planet opinion piece is wrong.

BRT was supported by the two major environmental groups working for better transportation in our area, the Sierra Club and TransForm.

BRT was supported by many individuals with a long history of environmental activism. Many supporters have degrees in city planning or transportation. Others, like myself, are not professionals but have been working for environmentally sound transportation for decades.

BRT was opposed by Telegraph Ave. merchants and vendors who cared only about its effect on business.

BRT was opposed by people in adjacent neighborhoods who cared only about its effect on traffic and parking in their own neighborhoods.

BRT was opposed by people who were simply pro-automobile activists, complaining that it would take away lanes that they use for driving, making their auto trips take 10 or 20 seconds longer.

Finally, BRT was opposed by the usual suspects who make a career of being against everything proposed in Berkeley.

Opponents did claim that BRT was not “sound transportation planning,” but those of us who have some background in transportation issues saw through them immediately. Their arguments generally took one number from the DEIR in isolation, and anyone experienced in transportation planning could see that they were new to the issues and did not understand what the number meant.

I will not rehash these arguments. I will just point out that the US Department of Transportation found that, of all the Small Starts projects proposed in 2010, our BRT project was the most cost-effective.

The writer of the Planet opinion piece seems to be blind to all these facts.

Merchants, vendors, and neighbors made some valid points about the impacts of BRT, which I think could have been accommodated in the final plan. Unfortunately, the career obstructionists stirred up so much opposition to the plan that the city killed it before the FEIR was completed and mitigations were developed.

Anyone with experience in local politics knows that it is easy to stir up opposition to a project by using scare tactics among those who are immediately impacted by it.

The overwhelming majority of BRT opponents were people who had never been active in the past on environmental issues or on transportation issues, and who became active only when a project was proposed in their back yard. The overwhelming majority of supporters were people with a long history of activism on environmental issues and transportation issues.

What do we usually call people like the majority of BRT opponents? People who were never active on energy issues until wind generators were proposed near their Cape Cod homes, or people who were never active on transportation issues until bicycle lanes were proposed near their Brooklyn homes or bus lanes were proposed near their Berkeley homes and businesses, people who then worked against these projects out of pure self-interest, without thinking of their impact on the entire region or on the environment, these people are usually called exactly what the New York Times called them: NIMBYs.

Charles Siegel’s most recent book is Unplanning: Livable Cities and Political Choices. He is a long-time Berkeley resident.

Letters to the Editor

The Report on the Library Lawsuit Meeting; Steven Finacom replies; Community Engagement - For Insiders Only?; Library Lawsuit Meeting; Let There be Light; The State Budget; Library Advertising is Free; Osher Lifelong Learning Institute; EPA; Nuclear Power
The Report on the Library Lawsuit Meeting

Last Tuesday night, city council members from west and south Berkeley called a meeting which Steve Finacom describes in your recent issue.

The people in those two communities have worked for years with the Berkeley Public Library to come up with plans for new buildings at the West and South Branches of the public library. Just as those plans were making their final way through the city’s bureaucracy, and after hundreds of citizens had participated in dozens of meetings to come up with those plans, a lawsuit was filed which may result in those libraries not being built. Delays will cause construction costs to rise, the city may have to pay legal fees. The three councilmembers from those areas called last Tuesday’s meeting because they are fearful their communities will end up with less appropriate, less modern libraries than they have asked for and deserve. In the case of the West Branch, the city’s plans call for it to be the first net zero energy library in the United States. To see those plans sent to the dust bin by a lawsuit filed by one person representing a small number of her associates, would be a tragedy.

The meeting was held to talk about ways to counteract the lawsuit by involving the affected communities. Councilmembers Max Anderson and Darryl Moore intended it to be a private strategy meeting among concerned parties. Mr. Finacom only mentions that “three Berkeley City Council members, the City of Berkeley Director of Library Services, two trustees of the Board of Library Trustees, and leaders of the Berkeley Public Library Foundation” were present. He fails to mention the most concerned parties who attended: ministers from south and west Berkeley churches, a school board member, a representative from the NAACP and residents of south and west Berkeley. (The plaintiff lives near the Claremont branch, as I do.) Mr. Finacom attempts to portray the meeting as some kind of secretive gathering that should have included the plaintiff in the lawsuit and the two people who accompanied her that evening. When has she invited those of us who favor new libraries for these deserving communities to the gatherings where she discusses her legal strategy as she seeks to prevent those buildings from being built?

Linda Schacht

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Steven Finacom replies:

No one appears to have come to the meeting intending to be a gatecrasher at a private affair. Everyone who Councilmember Moore selectively barred from the meeting, including me, appears to have shown up after receiving an e-mailed invitation from either Councilmember Anderson or Councilmember Wosniak inviting them to a public meeting.

Linda Schacht should know that because when she walked into the building lobby Councilmember Moore immediately called out to her that there had erroneously been a public invitation. “Oh!” she replied, in apparent surprise, looking at the members of the public standing around.

Linda Schacht says I “failed to report” that a number of community members were present at the meeting. I was not favored with a complete list of attendees by Councilmember Moore (who said he would not speak to me), nor did I have a chance to ask other participants, including Linda Schacht herself, who was there. They rushed out of the Community Center on their way to reconvening their private meeting elsewhere.

I listed all of the people I could identify who were allowed into the meeting-ten of them. I did not try to speculate in print on the identities of others, except for the apparent presence of Darryl Moore’s aide. From where I was standing, there were, at most, another five or six people visible in the meeting room. Readers can look at the pictures accompanying the article, which show the meeting room and its occupants both as they gathered, and as they left. If others at the meeting included west and south Berkeley “ministers, a school board member, a representative of the NAACP, and residents of south and west Berkeley”, I am glad to know that information.

Finally, as I wrote in the original article, Linda Schacht vehemently denied in the lobby outside the meeting room that she would want to portray those who filed the lawsuit as working against minority communities in South and West Berkeley. I had no reason to disbelieve her.

Then she walked into a private meeting that selectively included, as she states, Berkeley’s two African-American Councilmembers, two African-American Library Trustees, and African-American community leaders-including a NAACP representative!-to discuss responding to the Library lawsuit. She also describes it as a “private strategy meeting”, which is quite different from the “community engagement” veneer laid over the public invitation.

Steven Finacom

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Community Engagement - For Insiders Only?

I enjoyed Steve Finacom’s fine coverage of the recent “community engagement” meeting about the Concerned Library Users’ lawsuit over misuse of Measure FF funds. I do not think I have ever before been invited to an event - and then barred at the door. Fortunately I found myself in good company among a lively group of excluded.

This experience did nothing to diminish my feeling that the entire process behind the Board of Library Trustees’ (BOLT’s) plan to demolish the South and West Branch libraries, rather than renovate and expand them as specified by Measure FF, was an “in-crowd” affair.

City Councilmember Darryl Moore told Mr. Finacom that he had not seen the alternative plans by architect Todd Jersey for the South and West Branch Libraries. Mr. Jersey’s plans, like his recent success in restoring the Richmond Plunge, are BRILLIANT. I recommend that everyone interested in the branch libraries view them to see the many advantages they offer.

For each library, Mr. Jersey’s design would preserve the historic portion and accommodate all the same programs as the BOLT plan - in a larger building than provided by the BOLT plan. For the South Branch, this could be done at significantly lower cost - thus, more library for less money. And the stunning reading room seen in the historic photo by Karl H. Rieck could be restored.

For the West Branch Library, Mr. Jersey’s plan would restore the 1923 reading room and Classical Revival facade. Furthermore, he has designed a truly magical space for children, a circular room with windows all round, in the midst of the redwood trees at the site. Under his plan, the redwoods would be preserved, while the BOLT plan calls for some of these trees to be destroyed.

The Todd Jersey plans for the South and West Branch Libraries are superior environmentally, aesthetically, fiscally - and they meet the mandate of Measure FF. Why are the BOLT demolition plans even being considered?

Gale Garcia

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Library Lawsuit Meeting

The widely-announced “Community Engagement around Library Lawsuit” meeting at which Council member Darryl Moore denied admission to selected members of the press and public is emblematic of how library planning has operated in Berkeley:
exclude or ignore the public if it disagrees with you, claim to have public support even if there is little or none. (See Steven Finacom’s excellent article, ‘Community Engagement’ Meeting on Berkeley Library Lawsuit Becomes ‘Private,’” published March 16, 2011.)

Some of the very people fleeing the public meeting have been making public statements about the supposedly public process that the library followed in making its Measure FF plans. From this aborted meeting -- and the interview comments about not seeing the Todd Jersey plans for renovation publicly offered by the litigants -- all can see just how desperately resistant they are to even consider anyone and anything not in their closed circle.

And the incident raises important questions, such as: What were they hiding?

Following the article’s publication March 16, the library held its closing event for Claremont Branch library on Saturday, March 19. Not one of the three Council members listed as “Honored Special Guests” attended. The no-shows included Vice Mayor and Council member Linda Maio, who fled the publicly announced community meeting and instead hosted the ‘private’ one at her house, and Council Member Gordon Wozniak, whose office sent out the community meeting announcement with the all-capital letters request to “Please Pass this Information Along!”

It is beyond sad that those allowed in, who then fled -- including heads of the Berkeley Public Library Foundation and the Library, three City Council members, and members of the Board of Library Trustees -- clearly want the opposite of democracy and public process which so many of them have claimed is how the library’s planning has proceeded to date. Instead, they have worked to privatize the library and to silence and ignore legitimate criticism and real public discussion.

Peter Warfield, Executive Director, Library Users Association

* * *

Let There be Light

I would like to compliment Steve Finacom on some excellent reporting that uncovered Council members behaving in a manner they were ashamed to have exposed to the light of day.

They should be ashamed! Council member Darryl Moore became a recalcitrant bully, blocking entry to a public meeting room. Council member Max Anderson didn’t have the courage to stand up for his own constituents, invited to the meeting by his aide. Then after saying there would be “no meeting,” Council member Linda Maio hosted a secret meeting at her own home.

And for whom? Besides a few public employees, the only invited guests appear to have been some Berkeley Public Library Foundation board members. Why do they rate a special audience with Council members while ordinary members of the public are shut out? We’ll never know, because these people are too ashamed to tell the truth.

So I would say to anyone who wants to know what to think about the library projects - believe the opposite of whatever these people tell you. That’s the only way you’ll get the truth!

Lenny Chen

* * *

The State Budget

Governor Jerry Brown is getting nowhere in the state budget battle. And the reason is! It’s the Republicans, stupid, who keep California from passing its budget on time each year. The GOP with its catchy new slogan, “hell hath no fury like a taxpayer scorned ... “ is holding the state and its 32 million residents hostage again.

Sorry, but millions of California tax payers don’t agree with the anti-tax philosophy of Republicans and want them to get out of the way and let democracy do its work.

It’s like a Wisconsin replay in California. Unions gave Wisconsin’s Governor Scott Walker the concessions he wanted but he still wasn’t happy. In California. Democrats slashed $14 billion from welfare, universities, health care and other programs and the anti-tax neanderthals are still not happy. On the other hand, try bringing up the subject of cuts to prison over expenditures and Republican prison protectors go bombastic.

If the GOP wants an “all cuts” state budget, then it’s time to start cutting programs that are dear to Republicans and their Tea Party constituents, that, or recall these impediments to progress.

Ron Lowe

* * *

Library Advertising is Free

In the March 9th issue, a letter was run incorrectly inferring that the Berkeley Public Library was wasting tax-payer money by paying for ad space in the EastBayExpress. I would like to correct this misconception: EBE DONATES that ad space to the library.

We don’t pay a penny for it, and are really glad to have the opportunity to let a larger part of the community know about the great events and services that we offer. I know that there is a lot that people are choosing to get upset about when it comes to the library, but don’t let this non-issue be one of those things!!

Jack Baur, Teen Services Librarian, Berkeley Public Library

* * *

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

For University of California retirees the place to be on March 18th was the Freight & Salvage Coffee House for an Open House of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. OLLI is an educational program for life long learners age 50 and up, eager to explore new areas of knowledge, but without exams or grades. Distinguished Berkeley faculty and other Bay Area teachers share their expertise in more than 20 stimulating classes. It’s not surprising therefore that a large crowd lined up before the doors opened at 9:30. Complimentary coffee was served for new and would-be members who settled down for a two-hour program, as Susan Hoffman, the gracious Director, welcomed guests and gave a brief explanation of the new Spring 2011 classes.

Going through the courses to be offered, she introduced faculty members who gave a brief synopsis of the class they would be teaching. And what a variety of subjects there were. How to chose among the intriguing topics was a challenge in itself. I, personally, am considering Robert Hurwitt’s class, “Experiencing Theatre” and “Courtroom as Crucible: Famous Trials and Lawyers, taught by Curtis Caton, an attorney who practiced law for 40 years with the Heller Ehrman law firm in S.F. Discussion will center on such well-known trials as Sacco/ Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs and O.J. Simpson. Other classes that will attract a large audience are Linda Rugg’s “Yours Truly: Mark Twain” and Malcolm Margolin’s “Memoirs: Structuring the Story of One’s Life.”

Admittedly, OLLI classes are not inexpensive. Membership dues range from $40 to $100 (depending on your University status), and course fees are $125, with Workshop fees priced at $195. But the money is well spent as the programs inspire students to live with greater intention and an urge toward discovery.

Dorothy Snodgrass
EPA

By now everyone knows that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plans to regulate greenhouse gas emissions by automobiles. The U.S. House of Representatives claims that the EPA is overstepping its authority and there is a move to strip the EPA of its authority to regulate greenhouse gases. But the EPA is not overstepping its authority. The EPA enforces the Clean Air Act and the scientific consensus is that greenhouse gases endanger the environment. Once such a finding is made, the Supreme Court ruled in its 2007 Massachusetts v. EPA case that greenhouse gases could be regulated under the Clean Air Act beginning with motor vehicles. Justice Stevens writing for the majority wrote, “if EPA makes a finding of endangerment, the Clean Air Act requires the agency to regulate emissions.” Thus, by regulating greenhouse gases, the EPA is only doing what it should have done many years ago. On June 30, 2009, the EPA granted a waiver of the Clean Air Act preemption to California for its stricter greenhouse gas emission standards for motor vehicles beginning with the 2009 model year. If the EPA is stripped of its authority to regulate greenhouse gases, California would probably lose its waiver. The House will probably vote to strip the EPA of its authority. Even if the Senate goes along with the House, President Obama will probably veto the legislation.

We should not underestimate the power of the Big Energy lobby and global warming deniers.

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Nuclear Power

The unprecedented nuclear disaster in Japan is a dire warning to our increased vulnerability to suffer a similar fate. No longer can we accept the ‘feel good’ comforting words of our own nuclear regulatory body. There should be public hearings on the status of our aging nuclear power stations housing highly combustible and lethal materials. The nuclear power industry has a powerful lobby and is adversely influencing political discourse. James Rogers, the CEO of Duke Energy, a major supplier of nuclear energy, is co-chairman of the 2012 Democratic National Convention and an intimate insider to Obama’s reelection campaign. “It’s troubling”, said Dan Hirsch, a nuclear safety advocate in Southern California, “Obama is cozying up to large financial interests that might become donors and who wish our policy to be blind to the implications of this catastrophe.”

The nuclear industry is so capital intensive and risky that it cannot be privately financed but must survive on taxpayer guarantees to the tune of 37 billion dollars.

There is no safe repository for hundreds of tons of radioactive waste which will undoubtedly be silent killers to future generations of Americans.

We cannot afford to play Russian roulette with current and future generations of Americans. I urge concerned readers to contact your lawmakers and the White House and demand action to reverse support for this dangerous and inherently unnecessary steam generation albatross.

Jagjit Singh

Columnists

Dispatches From The Edge: Europe’s Austerity: A Grimm’s Fairy Tale

By Conn Hallinan

Mon Mar 21 14:59:00 -0700 2011

* In the Greek town of Aphidal, people have stopped paying road fees. In Athens, bus and metro riders are refusing to cough up the price of a ticket. On Feb. 23, 250,000 Greek protesters jammed the streets outside the nation’s parliament.

* The Portuguese nominated the protest song “A Luta E’Alegria” (The Struggle is Joy) for the Eurovision song contest and, when judges ignored it, walked out in protest. They also put 300,000 people into the streets of the country’s major cities on Mar. 12.

* Liverpool bailed from a Conservative-Liberal scheme to supplement government funding with private funding when it found there wasn’t any of either, and the British Toilet Association protested the closure of 1,000 public bathrooms across the country.

In ways big and small, Europeans from Greece to Portugal, from Britain to Bavaria are registering their growing anger with the relentless assault inflicted by government-imposed austerity programs.

Wages, working conditions and pensions that unions successfully fought for over the past half century are threatened by the collapse of banking systems caught up in a decade-long orgy of speculation that the average European neither took part in, nor profited from. Even the so-called “well off” workers of Bavaria, Germany’s industrial juggernaut, have seen their wages, adjusted for inflation, fall 4.5 percent over the past 10 years.

The narrative emanating from EU headquarters in Brussels is that high wages, early retirement, generous benefits, and a “lack of competition” has led to the current crisis that has several countries on the verge of bankruptcy, including Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain. Now, claim the “virtuous countries”—Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland—it is time for these spendthrift wastrels to pay the piper or, as German Chancellor Andrea Merkel says, “do their homework.”

It is an interesting story, a sort of Grimm’s fairy tale for the 21st century, but it bears about as much resemblance to the cause of the crisis as Cinderella’s fairy godmother does to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

While each country has its own particular conditions, there is a common thread that underlines the current crisis. Starting early in the decade, banks and financial houses flooded real estate markets with money, fueling a speculation explosion that inflated an enormous bubble. In climate and culture, Spain and Ireland may be very different places, but housing prices rocketed 500 percent in both countries.

The money was virtually free, with low interest rates on the bank side, and cozy tax deals cut between speculators and politicians on the other. That kept the cash within a small circle of investors. While Bavarian workers were watching their pay fall, German banks were taking in record profits and shoveling yet more capital into the real estate bubbles in Ireland and Spain. The level of debt eventually approached the grotesque. Ireland’s bank debts, if translated into dollars, would be the equal of $10 trillion.

The Wall Street implosion in 2008 sent shock waves around the world and popped bubbles all over Europe. While nations on the periphery of the European Union (EU) ranked first—Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Romania, Hungry, and Greece, economies at the heart of the EU—Britain, Spain, Italy, and Portugal—were also shaken. According to the Financial Times (FT), total claims by European banks on the Greek, Irish, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese debts alone are $2.4 trillion.

The European Union’s (EU) cure for the crisis is a formula with a long and troubled history, and one that has sowed several decades of falling living standards and frozen economies when it was applied to Latin America some 30 years ago. In simple terms, it is austerity, austerity and more aus-
told the you are paying," economist Peter Westaway said. "Debt will continue to increase as long as GDP to 160 percent of GDP by 2013. "Your is projected to increase from 127 percent of year, which means that Greece's debt burden Growth is expected to fall 3.4 percent this year, but only if the Irish cut $4 billion over the next four years, raised payroll taxes 41 percent, cut old age pensions, increased the retirement age, slashed social spending, and privatized many public services. When Ireland recently asked for a reduction in the onerous interest rate for this bailout, the EU agreed to lower it 1 percent and spread the onerous interest until the bank debts are paid off.

There are similarities between the current European crisis and the 1981 Latin American debt crisis. "In both cases debts were issued in a currency over which borrowing countries had no control," says the FT’s John Rathbone. For Latin America it was the dollar, for Europe the Euro. Secondly, there was first a period of easy credit, followed by a worldwide recession.

Bailouts were tied to the so-called “Washington Consensus” that demanded privatization, massive cuts in social services, wage reductions, and government austerity. The results were disastrous. As public health programs were eviscerated, diseases like cholera reappeared. As education budgets were slashed, illiteracy increased. And as public works projects vanished, joblessness went up and wages went down.

“It took several years to realize that deflating wages and shrinking economies were inconsistent with being able to fully pay off debts,” notes Rathbone. And yet the “virtuous” EU countries are applying almost exactly the same formula to the current debt crisis in Europe.

For instance, the EU and the IMF agreed to bail out Ireland’s banks for $114 billion, but only if the Irish cut $4 billion over the next four years, raised payroll taxes 41 percent, cut old age pensions, increased the retirement age, slashed social spending, and privatized many public services. When Ireland recently asked for a reduction in the onerous interest rate for this bailout, the EU agreed to lower it 1 percent and spread the payments, but only on the condition of yet more austerity measures and an increase in Ireland’s corporate tax rate. The newly elected Fine Gael/Labor government refused.

To pay back its own $152 billion bailout, however, the Greek government took the deal. But the price is more austerity and an agreement to sell off almost $70 billion in government properties, including some islands and many of the Olympic games sites.

But the “deal” will hardly repay the debt. Unemployment in Greece is 15 percent, and as high as 35 percent among the young. Wages have fallen 20 percent, pensions have been cut, and rates for public services hiked. Growth is expected to fall 3.4 percent this year, which means that Greece’s debt burden is projected to increase from 127 percent of GDP to 160 percent of GDP by 2013. “Your debt will continue to increase as long as your growth rate is below the interest rate you are paying,” economist Peter Westaway told the New York Times.

Austerity measures in Portugal and Spain have also cut deeply into the average person’s income and made life measurably harder. In Spain, more than one in five workers are unemployed, and consumer spending is sharply off, dropping by a third this past holiday season. Portugal is actually in worse shape. It has one of the slowest economic growth rates in Europe, a dead-in-the-water export industry, and a youth unemployment rate of over 30 percent.

In Britain, the Conservative-Liberal government has cut almost $130 billion from the budget and lobbyed for what it calls the “Big Society.” The latter is similar to George H.W. Bush’s “thousand points of light” and envisions a world in which private industry and voluntarism replaces government-funded programs. The actual result has been the closure of libraries, senior centers, public pools, youth programs, and public toilets. The cutbacks have been most deeply felt in poorer areas of the country—those that traditionally vote Labor, as cynics are wont to point out—but they have also taken a bite out of the Conservative Party’s heartland, the Midlands.

Conservative voters have organized demonstrations to save libraries in staid communities like Charlbury and to protest turning public woodlands over to private developers. According to retired financial officer Barbara Allison, there are 54 local voluntary organizations that run programs like meals on wheels in Charlbury. “We’re already devoting an awful lot of our time to charity and volunteers,” she told the FT. “Am I not doing enough? Is [Conservative Prime Minister] David Cameron going to volunteer?” In any case, as Labor Party leader Ed Milliband points out, how does Cameron expect people “to volunteer at the local library when it is being shut down?”

U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner strongly endorsed the Cameron program last month and said that he “did not see much risk” that the cutbacks would impede growth. But even the IMF warns that the formula of treating debt as the central problem in the middle of an economic recession has drawbacks. This past October an IMF study concluded “the idea that fiscal austerity stimulates economic activity in the short term finds little support in the data.”

But a massive program of privatization does mean enormous windfall profits for private investors and the banks and financial institutions that finance the purchase of everything from soccer fields to national parks. Those profits, in turn, fuel political machines that use money and media to dominate the narrative that greedy pensioners, lay-about teachers, and free loaders are the problem. And austerity is the solution.

But increasingly people are not buying the message, and from Athens to Wisconsin they are taking their reservations to the streets. The crowd in Charlbury was a modest 200, and the tone polite. In Athens the demonstration drew 250,000 and people chanted “Kleftes,” or “thieves.” But the message in both places is much the same: we have had enough.

A bus driver in Athens told Australian journalist Kia Mistiles that his wages had been cut from 1800 Euros ($2500) a month to 1200 Euros ($1660). “There are more cuts coming into effect in the next three months, that’s why the protests are heating up. I am worried that my wages will be cut to 800 Euros ($1110) a month, and if that happens I don’t know how I will survive.”

But he has a plan. “The situation is reaching a climax,” he told Mistiles, “because working people know that the austerity measures go too far, and with the final roll-out, they can’t survive. So there is nothing to do but protest,” adding, “You wait until next summer. The situation in Greece will explode.”

It is unlikely that Greece will be alone.

Conn Hallinan can be read at dispatches-fromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com

Wild Neighbors: Not Your Father’s Bird Guide?

By Joe Eaton
Tue Mar 22 20:16:00 -0700 2011

Richard Crossley
Birding, for such a quiet occupation, seems unusually prone to revolutions. In the old days, BP (Before Peterson) the custom was to shoot any bird of interest so you could examine the fine points of its plumage in the hand. Roger Tory Peterson’s first field guide changed all that. With somewhat schematic paintings and concise text, Peterson offered the ability to identify most birds through binoculars or a spotting scope.

That set a template for successor bird guides, although presentation has varied. The Chandler Robbins/Arthur Singer book may have been the first to have text facing illustrations. The Audubon guides introduced photographs as an alternative to paintings. National Geographic’s entry incorporated new field marks from a new wave of birders. Sibley focused on a couple of species per page, going into more detail about variant plumages. A rash of specialty guides to paintings. The Audubon guides, although presentation has varied.

Some of these work quite nicely, although I have to note the incongruity of a flock of solitaire sandpipers. The Wilson’s storm-petrel montage, to pick just one, is beautifully done. I like the stern-looking ospreys, and the inclusion of a mallard in the cackling goose plate for scale. A few of the smaller illustrations are problematic in terms of relative sizes: the northern beardless-tyrant, a miniscule flycatcher, is made to look about the same size as the adjacent greater pewee.

Birds are grouped by habitat and lifestyle rather than in taxonomic order. That’s always changing, says Crossley, and he has a point. Hawks and owls are together, as are “walking waterbirds” (shorebirds, waders, rails), “swimming waterbirds” (ducks, grebes, loons, auks), and “flying waterbirds” (gulls, terns, petrels, pelicans.) Coots and phalaropes are with the “walking waterbirds” (go figure.) Songbirds have their own section. Crossley caught the most recent round of taxonomic splits but appears to have missed a few higher-level changes: storks are no longer considered relatives of the New World vultures. Corrections and addenda will show up on an accompanying website (www.crossleybirds.com). This may be the first guide to use banding-code abbreviations for every species. Too much like text-messaging for my taste, but some will appreciate it.

The accompanying text is, in the Peterson tradition, brief and informal. Maybe more informal than American birders are used to:

- the northern goshawk, for example, is “large and nasty,” the black vulture has a “hideous gray head,” the ruddy duck is “chunky and punky.” Crossley emphasizes the way a bird moves, which is useful. Songs and calls are sometimes described (the northern mockingbird is “a singer with a big voice that has driven my wife mad”), but not consistently. You’d never know the loggerhead shrike sings, and not badly either.

Although it covers a fair number of western species, either as Great Plains residents or strays to the east, I would expect the Crossley guide to have a primarily regional appeal. California birders may want to wait for the western counterpart. Then again, many birders, like birds, are highly mobile. If I were headed east and had room in my luggage, I’d take this along.

Room is a significant factor. This is a big book: it outweighs the one-volume Sibley by a pound, and would not fit in the typical pocket. The heft would make it inconvenient for field use unless you had a caddy. (“Hand me the Crossley, would you?”) It’s more the kind of thing you page through in the evening or on rainy weekends in anticipation of your next day out.

I’ve shown my review copy to birders at several levels of proficiency, with generally positive reactions. Crossley is not for people who derive great satisfaction from being able to identify third-cycle hybrid gulls. (But if you’re that kind of person, you already own the gull book.) The consensus: this would be really useful for novice and intermediate birders, and even old dogs can learn a trick or two from it.

Eclectic Rant: Time to End the U.S. Economic Embargo of Cuba

By Ralph E. Stone
Mon Mar 21 14:34:00 -0700 2011

The United States is the last country in the Western Hemisphere with no formal relations with Cuba. It is time for the United States and Cuba to mend fences. For a start, the U.S. should end the economic embargo against Cuba. The embargo makes it illegal for U.S. corporations to do business with Cuba. U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba are also a form of economic sanctions.

Introduction
The rest of the world wants the embargo ended as seen by the October 2010, United Nations General Assembly overwhelming vote -- for the 19th year in a row -- in favor of condemning the U.S. embargo against Cuba. The vote was 187-2 with 3 abstentions. Only the U.S. and Israel voted against the resolution.
In September 2010, President Barack Obama extended U.S. sanctions against Cuba under the Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA), saying that he failed to take a long overdue step toward dismantling an ineffective and detrimental policy.

**Cuba-U.S. Relations in a Nutshell**

In 1854 a secret proposal known as the Ostend Manifesto was devised by U.S. diplomats to acquire Cuba from Spain for $130 million. The manifesto was rejected due to objections from anti-slavery campaigner when the plans became public.

In 1897, U.S. President William McKinley offered to buy Cuba for $300 million.[9]

Rejection of the offer, and an explosion that sunk the American battleship USS Maine in Havana harbor, led to the Spanish–American War.

U.S. military rule of the island lasted until 1902 when Cuba was finally granted formal independence. An agreed condition between Cuba and the U.S. to secure the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the island was Cuba’s adoption of the Platt Amendment.

The Platt amendment to a U.S. Army Appropriations Bill of 1901 gave the U.S. the right to intervene militarily in Cuban affairs whenever the U.S. decided such intervention was warranted. Cubans were given the choice of accepting the Platt Amendment or remaining under U.S. military occupation indefinitely.

U.S. intervention endowed Cuba with a series of weak, corrupt, and dependent governments. In 1903, the U.S. and Cuba signed the “Cuban-American Treaty,” giving the U.S. a perpetual lease of, and absolute control over, Guantánamo Bay, a blatant example of U.S. gunboat diplomacy.

The current Cuban government considers the U.S. presence in Guantánamo to be illegal and the “Cuban-American Treaty” to have been procured by the threat of force in violation of international law.

Even a cursory review of Cuba-U.S. relations reveals that the U.S. has much to answer for. After Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz came to power in 1959, overthrowing the U.S.-backed regime of Fulgencio Batista, the U.S. could have embraced Castro and offered him assistance.

In 1959, shortly after taking power, Fidel Castro traveled to the U.S. The Eisenhower administration could have embraced him, offering him economic assistance. But remember this was during the Cold War and Castro smacked of socialism/communism. Eisenhower snubbed him. He met instead with Vice President Nixon for a few hours. No economic assistance was offered. The next year Castro turned to Russia for economic assistance and the rest is history.

On July 31, 2006, following intestinal surgery from an undisclosed digestive illness, Fidel Castro transferred his responsibilities to the First Vice-President, his younger brother Raúl Castro. On February 24, 2008, the Cuban National Assembly elected Raúl Castro to succeed Fidel as the President of Cuba.

It would seem that Raúl is now the undisputed Cuban leader, although the shadow of Fidel will linger over Cuba until his demise and possibly long thereafter. Who will succeed the 79-year old Raúl? And will the U.S. keep its hands off after his death? These are questions for a later time.

**Brief History of U.S. Embargo and Travel Restrictions of Cuba**

In 1961, the Kennedy administration severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, and in 1962-63, the U.S. imposed an economic and trade embargo and travel restrictions following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by U.S.-backed Cuban exiles.

In 1977, the Carter administration lifted the travel restrictions. In 1982, the Reagan administration re-established the travel restrictions; and in 1989 travelers to Cuba could spend only $100 per day.

In 1992, the Clinton administration, imposed fines on Americans traveling to Cuba from a third country; in 1993, travel was allowed for religious, educational, and human rights groups; in 1994, travel restrictions were tightened in response to a mass exodus from Cuba across the Florida straits; in 1995, travel restrictions were reversed to promote democracy in Cuba; in 1996, all direct flights from U.S. to Cuba stopped because Cuban MiGs had shot down two Brothers to the Rescue planes; in 1998, following Pope John Paul II visit to Cuba direct flights to Cuba were allowed for religious pilgrimages; in 1999, people-to-people trips were increased; and in 2000, ended travel for tourist activities.

In 2001, the Bush administration started enforcing restrictions for “unlicensed” travel; in 2003, travel was no longer limited to humanitarian needs, amount of money that could be carried raised from $300 to $3,000; but in 2004, announced the most stringent travel policies in years limiting Cuban-American travel to once every three years, limited to $300 quarterly that can be sent to Cuba, spending in Cuba limited to $50; and in 2005, religious travel reduced to once a year for groups up to 25.

With a Raúl Castro leadership, a Obama presidency, and perhaps just the passage of time, Obama and Congress seemed to be taking a fresh look at the 49-year old embargo and travel restrictions. In 2009, Congress removed the Treasury Department’s funding to enforce Cuban-American family travel restrictions.

Obama responded by changing regulations to allow Cuban-Americans to visit relatives once a year instead of once every three years. In April 2009, Obama lifted travel and gift restrictions for Cuban-Americans, allowing them to freely visit Cuba and stay as long as they like, and to send financial help to family members.

The U.S. also shut down a ticker atop the U.S. interests section in Havana, Cuba, that had since 2006 scrolled anti-Cuba slogans in 5-foot-high crimson letters.

In February 2010, the Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act (H.R. 4645) was introduced in the last session of Congress. This bill would have restored the right of Americans to travel to Cuba and would have lifted restrictions on agricultural sales to Cuba. The proposed legislation died in the last Congress. Bills not acted on in one Congress, ordinarily die when the next Congress convenes.

In January 14, 2011, President Obama rescinded most of the Cuba travel restrictions. Described as Purposeful Travel to enhance contact with the Cuban people and support civil society including religious, cultural and educational travel. Information on travel to Cuba can be found on the following website: [www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/cuba.aspx](http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/cuba.aspx)

**Conclusion**

My wife and I traveled “legally” to Cuba in November 2003 on one of the last so-called “People-to-People” tours, visiting Havana, Viñales, and Santiago de Cuba. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Treasury Department stopped issuing “people-to-people licenses. As the remaining licenses expired — most in November or December 2003 — so did those trips. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit. With this year’s rescission of most of the remaining travel restrictions, we may legally travel to Cuba again. The next step is to formally end the U.S. embargo of Cuba. We in addition, the U.S. should consider returning Guantánamo Bay to Cuba.

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**On Mental Illness: the Effects of Collective Disasters**

*By Jack Bragen*  
*Mon Mar 21 15:01:00 -0700 2011*
I had a friend/adversary in the mid-1990’s with whom I sometimes shared delusions. We had a tendency to get one another into trouble. His delusions were mostly of a military-government-secret agent theme. When he was well, this man was very kind, and worked in the psychiatric self-help field to help others. He had gotten well after a lengthy stint of wild mania in which he frightened a number of people, including me, and in which he was fairly destructive. He was back at work, and I didn’t have much contact with him because of how bad our encounters had been.

Then came 9/11.

Within a month, my friend-adversary was back on the street, apparently psychotic and self medicating with alcohol. I feared the exposure to the hot sun wasn’t good for him.

Within another couple of months, I was shocked to hear of his passing. He had died apparently of a heart attack, but I blame his mental illness as the cause of death. On the one hand, I wouldn’t need to fear him making my life difficult any longer; but I surely hadn’t wished him dead.

The nation under attack as well as the prospect of going to war, and the theme of espionage running through all this, may have served to validate his delusional system. Beneath it all, he may also have been a sensitive man, and that could make him disturbed by the 9/11 tragedy and by prospect of going to war. He responded by having another psychotic episode, at a time in his life in which his body could no longer handle the stresses.

Disasters may affect those with mental illness more than those without. My wife, recounts that when she was first mentally ill the hospital was showing operation desert storm on all the televisions there. It had a bad effect on her at the time; she believed she was in the middle of the war zone. This was due to the psychosis that was affecting her, and due to the brutal nature of war.

The nuclear catastrophe now taking place in Japan, and also the earthquake and tsunami there, have been a provocative subject for my sensitivities. I have had a phobia of nuclear annihilation since childhood. When I was psychotic, many of the delusions were of a nuclear war/radioactivity theme. And also, just as an ordinary citizen, my heart goes out to the people in Japan who have been killed, and to those in that country who are suffering through this disaster. This is Japan’s biggest catastrophe since WWII and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When I attended a meeting of a bipolar group in Walnut Creek recently, there was some mention of the incident, and someone said there was a run on potassium iodide.

I am not completely sure of how other people, mentally ill or not, are reacting to this incident, but for me at least, it is very heart rending. For those readers of this column who have a mental illness, I suggest taking extra care of yourselves at this time of international stress.

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Senior Power: Nihon Elderly

By Helen Ripprier Wheeler

Tue Mar 22 20:55:00 -0700 2011

You may have noted many old persons in photos from the Tōhoku (“northeast”) region, a geographical area of Japan. It occupies the northeastern portion of Honshū, the largest island of Japan. The population estimate of Tōhoku as of 2008 was 9,708,257. The region consists of six prefectures: Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata. Sendai is the capital city of Miyagi Prefecture, and the largest city in the Tōhoku Region. The city of trees was founded in 1600 by the daimyo Date Masamune. Here, abstracted from “Fourteen elderly die after evacuating Japanese hospital,” by Associated Press medical writer Margie Mason (March 17, 2011), is news:

First came the tsunami, which killed many elderly people unable to flee their homes. Then came the radiation, which forced a hospital to evacuate some 100 older patients. Fourteen did not survive.

The earthquake-spawned tsunami and the nuclear crisis it created have taken a particularly heavy toll on the elderly in this rapidly aging nation. Many have already died and now those who lived are struggling to survive in cold emergency centers or hospitals without electricity or water and shortages of everything from medicine to adult diapers.

Many of the rural, seaside towns hit by the tsunami were in economic decline and had seen an exodus of young people, who moved to major cities for work. That may explain why many of those staying in temporary shelters are elderly. At one, a junior high school in the city of Kesennuma (Miyagi Prefecture), a few ointment tubes, bandages and boxes of aspirin and stomach and cold medicines were stacked on a table at a shelter at a junior high school.

“There’s not enough,” Keiko Endo, a 58-year-old nurse, said. “It’s a problem.” Nearby sat a group of elderly men and women, a single kerosene heater doing nothing to warm a large drafty gym in chilly, often snowy weather.

“The consequence of the earthquake, but more the tsunami, has caused the loss of their prescriptions,” he said. “Some don’t remember what they were taking, how much, and what was the exact prescription. So that makes things a little more complicated.”


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A composition in verse rather than in prose.

Poetry is a literary genre. Two of my favorite American poets, from two different centuries, as different as can be, are Dorothy Rothschild Parker (1893-1967) and Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886). Parker is best known for her caustic wit and sharp eye for contemporary urban foibles. Truth is Dickinson’s all. Her mysterious verse and perception hold enormous meaning.

Parker wrote in all genres: poems, short-stories, novels, reviews, screenplays, newspaper columns and reports. Because of the things she said/wrote and how she lived/died, at 74, she is seen variously as clever, witty, offensive, ambitious, unacceptable. Blacklisted in the 1940’s, she left most of her estate to Martin Luther King, Jr.. “Resume” is from her best-selling (unusual for poetry) collection, Enough Rope, published in 1926.

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren’t lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.
The truth must dazzle gradually, wrote Dickinson, who lived until age 56. It is so apt that I have borrowed it for the title of my next book, an unpublishable memoir.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or very man be blind—
But Dickinson could also create sweet ditties, like
A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,  
And then he drank a Dew  
From a convenient Grass—  
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall  
To let a Beetle pass—  
He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all around—  
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought—  
He stirred his Velvet Head  
Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home—  
Than Oars divide the Ocean,  
Too silver for a seam—  
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon  
Leap, flashless as they swim.

A poem is a verbal (words!) composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way. It is characterized by condensed language chosen for sound and suggestive power and by the use of such literary techniques as meter, metaphor, and rhyme.

Must a poem rhyme? Is Parker’s “Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses” a poem? Does it rhyme and have meter?

A limerick is an often bawdy (think Nan Tucker), nonsense poem of 5 anapestic lines. Two short syllables are followed by one long one, as in the word seventeen. Edward Lear (1812–1888) was an English artist, illustrator, author, and poet, renowned today primarily for his limericks. His most famous piece of nonsense, The Owl and the Pussy-cat (1867) was written for the children of his patron.

A ballad is a narrative poem, often of folk origin, intended to be sung, consisting of simple stanzas usually having a recurrent refrain. The Ballad of Typhoid Mary, for example.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote lyric poetry. A lyric poem is not narrative, not dramatic. It expresses subjective thoughts and feelings, often in a songlike style such as the sonnet, 14-line verse form. Poet Louise Bogan (1897-1970) believed that “Lyric poetry if it is at all authentic...is based on some emotion—on some occasion, on some real confrontation.”

Haiku is a very short Japanese lyric poem of 17 syllables, having 3 unrhymed lines of 5-7-5 syllables, traditionally invoking an aspect of nature or the seasons and often containing an indication of the season. For example, Kazue Mizumura’s

Clink!  
An iced branch falls. [5]  
I see the shattered moonlight [7] Scatter at my feet. [5]

Figures of speech are used by poets to enhance their work— to facilitate communication,

feeling, emotion. They are good stuff because they serve to seize our attention and to inform, sometimes to persuade. Often, they’re simply a pleasant variation. Three of the major figures of speech are alliteration, simile and metaphor.

Alliteration is the repetition of an initial sound in two or more words of a phrase or a line of poetry. It functions to appeal to the reader’s or listener’s ear, and to bind the phrase. For example, William Blake (1757-1827)’s

Tyger, Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, dissimilar thing. Two essentially unlike things are compared, usually in a phrase introduced by like or as. For example, from Rita Dove’s WingfootLake(Independence Day, 1964):

“...the girls like young horses eyeing the track.” Metaphor is a figure of speech containing an implied comparison in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used as one thing is applied to another, dissimilar thing, thus making an implicit comparison. It involves nonliteral use of words. For example, from Emily Dickinson’s “After great pain, a formal feeling comes:” the stiff shirt / a quartz contentment / the hour of lead.

It is possible to overdo use of metaphors. “Come, Captain Age, With your great sea-chest full of treasure! Under the yellow and wrinkled tarpaulin Disclose the carved ivory And the sandalwood inlaid with pearl. Riches of wisdom and years?” (Sarah Norcliffe Cleghorn [1876-1959] Contested at Forty. 1916.)

Poetry helped me to be a little less stupid as I stumbled through the process,” writes Rachel Hadas in Strange Relation: A Memoir of Marriage, Dementia and Poetry (Paul Dry Books, 2010). The strange relation is Hadas’ spouse, victim at 61 of early onset dementia. As she negotiated the years before George moved to an assisted living facility, reading and writing became her life line. Just to help her manage, she says. “Poetry has always been a way of coping for me...since my father died when I was 17, I’ve turned to poetry not only to express my feelings...but consistently to figure out what I was feeling at a given time.” Chapter 3: “Into the Murky World” is online at National Public Radio’s http://www.npr.org.

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) explored the meaning of “Courage” in later years, evoking a series of concrete experiences and visual images. The final verse:

Later,  
When you face old age and its natural conclusion  
Your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
Each spring will be a sword you’ll sharpen,  
Those you love will live in a fever of love.  
And you’ll bargain with the calendar  
And at the last moment  
When death opens the back door  
You’ll put on your carpet slippers  
And stride out.

Eighty-five year old, retired language teacher and Berkeley resident Lenore Waters is a powerful senior who coordinates the French conversation class at the North Berkeley Senior Center (2-4 P.M. Mondays,) volunteers at the Berkeley Rep, and authors books with daughter Jennifer, aka Jennifer Blowdryer, e.g. The Revolution of 1964; Mother-Daughter Poems.

WISDOM by Lenore Waters, January 2011

Having lived eighty five years  
Am I ready to sit atop  
A high rocky mountain  
Waiting for pilgrims to  
Make the hard painful climb  
To ask for answers,  
Answers to questions  
Much much older than I?  
The Pilgrim might ask:  
How do I find HAPPINESS?  
Will I ever find another job?  
Why do my children hate me?  
Where did I go wrong?  
Is Ms or Mister Right  
Around the corner?  
Where do I get on the road of Happiness?  
And I, from my precarious perch  
With eighty five years
Worth of supposed wisdom
Will answer
You’re asking me?
You’re asking ME?
Retired social worker, union and YMCA member Irving Kestin shares with us The Staircase:
The house staircase led quietly to the upper storage area.
Everything stored over the past 60 plus years by succeeding related generations of occupants
A littered, cluttered area. Walking there meant climbing in between, around mounds of furniture, left overs, kitchen equipment.
At night, whispers wafted downward from the staircase.
Whispers from those past generations.
The cat’s soft meow, the dog Tim’s muffled cry of joy.
Grandmother Thelma’s English accented voice, reciting a poem,
The muffled bass roar of grandfather Ajax.
Easier to store than dispose and close the past.

POETIC OCCASIONS:
2 P.M., 4th Monday at the North Berkeley Senior center: Poetry writing with Nancy Wilson
9 A.M. Thursdays at the North Berkeley Senior Center: Poetry Writing with Berkeley Adult School instructor Davis. Note: BAS tuition is $30.; ask about scholarships funded by the NBSC Advisory Council.
1-3 P.M. Fridays at the North Berkeley Senior Center: Senior Poets, Old & New with volunteer instructor Neveen.
7-9 P.M. Second Tuesdays at the Albany branch of the Alameda County Library: Poetry readings featuring local poets followed by open mic. Contact: Dan Hess(510) 526-3720 x17 dhess@aclibrary.org
10:30-11:45 A.M. March 24-April 28, 2011 at the Emeryville Senior Center: Poetry Workshop Instructed by Janell Moon, Emeryville Poet Laureate. Note: There is an annual Center membership fee; ask about scholarships.
Thursday, March 24, 2011: Celebrate the one year anniversary of the Affordable Care Act
Helen Ripper Wheeler can be reached at pen136@dextreme.com. Please, no email attachments or phone calls.

Dispatches From the Edge: China & the U.S.: Things That Go Bang
By Conn Hallinan
Sun Mar 20 11:28:00 -0700 2011

Reading the headlines about U.S.-China relations might lead one to conclude that current tensions between the two have less to do with political differences than chemical imbalances: “The Chinese Tiger Shows Its Claws” vs. “China Helps Defuse Korea Crisis”; or “America is far too soft in its dealings with Beijing” vs. “Blaming China will not solve America’s problems.” What comes to mind is a dose of Thorazine, or maybe a Lithium regime?

In fact, there are both real differences and common ground, but sorting through them can be a taxing exercise in deep analysis. Are the tensions over an increasingly aggressive Beijing beginning to assert itself in a world formerly dominated by the Americans? Or is Washington encircling China with allies and military bases aimed at blocking the rise of an up-and-coming international rival?

On the surface this antagonism resembles the imperial competition between Britain and Germany at end of the 19th century, but the world of 2011 is very different than in 1914, far more connected, far more interdependent, and yet still dangerous. What seems clear is that every time either side brings in its military, tensions increase and solutions turn elusive.

The partnership between Beijing and Washington is built on money and trade. China currently holds almost a trillion dollars in U.S. Treasury Securities, and yearly trade between the two is over $400 billion. In comparison, China’s trade with the entire European Union is about the same. Both economies are interdependent, and trouble in one generally means trouble in the other.

But as the number one and number two economies in the world, China and the U.S. are also competitors for markets and raw materials.

China’s current number two energy user in the world, and, to fuel its explosive industrialization, it will require 11.3 million barrels of oil a day (bpd) by 2015. Since it only produces 3.7 million bpd on its own, much of China’s foreign policy is aimed at insuring a steady flow of energy. How that energy gets to China, and who supplies it, is the rub.

China’s major suppliers are Saudi Arabia, Angola and Iran, which means about 80 percent of its energy supplies travel by sea through two choke points, the Straits of Hormuz and the Malacca Straits. Both are controlled by the U.S. Navy.

Beijing has adopted a two-pronged strategy to deal with its energy insecurity. First, it is increasingly moving its energy supplies via pipelines from Russia and Central Asia. The Turkmenistan-Xinjiang pipeline is up and running, as is the huge Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline from Russia.

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But the naval buildup is only partly due to Chinese nervousness over its sea routes. A major impetus behind the increase came out of a 1996 incident, when the Clinton administration sent two aircraft carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Straits during a tense standoff between Formosa and the mainland. Since the Chinese did not have an aircraft carrier, or much in the way of weapons that could challenge them, Beijing was forced to back off. It was a humiliation in their home waters that the Chinese were not about to forget.

China’s navy, however, is a long way from presenting any serious challenge to the U.S. For instance, China’s lone aircraft carrier was originally constructed by the Russians in the 1980s, and is half the size of a Nimitz-class carrier, of which the U.S. has 10.

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However, China’s push to keep the U.S. out of areas it considers “core” has also put it in conflict with a number of south Asian nations that have equal claims on islands in the South China Sea. Some of that tension is the result of some serious high handedness by Beijing. In responding to protests over China’s claims, Yang Jiechi, China’s foreign minister, sounded almost imperial: “China is a big country and other countries are small.
The spat gave Washington an opportunity to extend its support to countries in the region, including Vietnam, which as welcomed U.S. naval vessels back to Cam Ranh Bay and carried out joint military maneuvers with their old enemies.

Beijing views U.S. efforts to “mediate” disputes in its core areas as part of a campaign to encircle China with hostile bases and allies. The U.S. has more than 100 bases in Japan, 85 in South Korea, plus ones in the Philippines, Guam, and even a few in Central Asia.

“If you are a strategic thinker in China, you do not have to be a paranoid conspiracy theorist to think that the U.S. is trying to bandwagon Asia against China,” says Simon Tay, chair of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

But, in the case of the 1996 Taiwan incident and the recent South China Sea brouhaha, military threats ended up backfiring on both China and the U.S. The Clinton administration’s gunboat diplomacy ignited a naval building program by China that now presents a local challenge to the U.S. And China’s cavalier approach to its south Asian neighbors ended up giving Washington an opening and handing Beijing a diplomatic setback.

Likewise China’s prickliness with India over their mutual border has given the U.S. greater influence in New Delhi, and a recent dustup between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku-Diaoyus islands has pushed Tokyo closer to Washington.

In short, military threats, even veiled ones, generally end up blowing up on whoever makes them.

In part this is a reflection of the difference between the world of 1914 and today. Back then imperial adventures generally brought benefits. Today the terms “adventures” and “overreach” are almost synonymous.

The U.S. has the most powerful military in the world, but its sojourn in Iraq has been a strategic disaster, and it is bogged down in an unwinnable war in Afghanistan. The U.S. could probably win any conventional battle on the planet, but it increasingly finds that it cannot win a war. It could flatten Iran, but does anyone believe the Iranians would then surrender? It would be far more likely that the consequent jump in oil prices would topple economies across the globe.

In contrast, the Chinese have recently cut a deal for Iraqi oil, and Afghan minerals, all without losing a single soldier. They have also invested $120 billion in Iran’s energy and become Teheran’s number one trading partner. While the U.S. was building new military bases in Central America and firing up its Fifth Fleet to rattle sabers in Latin America, China was toppling the U.S. as the continent’s major trading partner.

The recent U.S.-China summit went smoothly, countering much of the rhetoric that the two giants were on a collision course. But while Washington and Beijing found much to agree on (and tip-toed past some of what they did not), the tension is still there.

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Read Conn Hallinan at dispatches-fromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com

Dispatches From the Edge: China & the U.S. : Things That Go Bang
By Conn Hallinan

Reading the headlines about U.S.-China relations might lead one to conclude that current tensions between the two have less to do with political differences than chemical imbalances: “The Chinese Tiger Shows Its Claws” vs. “China Helps Defuse Korea Crisis”; or “America is far too soft in its dealings with Beijing” vs. “Blaming China will not solve America’s problems.” What comes to mind is a dose of Thorazine, or maybe a Lithium regime?

In fact, there are both real differences and common ground, but sorting through them can be a taxing exercise in deep analysis. Are the tensions over an increasingly aggressive Beijing beginning to assert itself in a world formerly dominated by the Americans? Or is Washington encircling China with allies and military bases aimed at blocking the rise of an up-and-coming international rival?

On the surface this antagonism resembles the imperial competition between Britain and Germany at end of the 19th century, but the world of 2011 is very different than in 1914, far more connected, far more interdependent, and yet still dangerous. What does seem clear is that every time either side brings in its military, tensions increase and solutions turn elusive.

The partnership between Beijing and Washington is built on money and trade. China currently holds almost a trillion dollars in U.S. Treasury Securities, and yearly trade between the two is over $400 billion. In comparison, China’s trade with the entire European Union is about the same. Both economies are interdependent, and trouble in one generally means trouble in the other.

But as the number one and number two economies in the world, China and the U.S. are also competitors for markets and raw materials.

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Arts & Entertainment

Theater Review: Narnia, the Musical

By Steven Finacom
Mon Mar 21 14:37:00 -0700 2011

Near the beginning of the musical, “Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe”, a cranky housekeeper at a historic English country estate warns four newly arrived children, “I see you all have that ‘I’m going to explore Marbleton Manor’ look. Forget it. The Age of Exploration is OVER. Understood?”

Fortunately the children ignore her and, through the agency of the Berkeley Playhouse, local audiences are drawn into a fascinating and fun world of imagination and allegory that plays through Sunday, April 3, 2011 at the Julia Morgan Center for the Arts on College Avenue.

It’s a good show and from the online ticket website it looks (as of this writing) that seats are still available for several upcoming performances.

The show is a musical adaption of the enduring C.S. Lewis novel. Jon Tracy directs this particular production, with musical direction by Amy Dalton.

If you don’t know the plot of the book, it’s easily summarized. The four Pevensie children—Peter, Susan, annoying Edmund, and precocious little Lucy—are evacuated from London during the Blitz to a mysterious country estate where they find a strange portal that leads them into the magical land of Narnia.

Narnia’s mythical creatures—come-to life and talking animals unhappily dwell in a perpetual winter imposed by the vain and capricious White Witch. “A witch doesn’t have to keep promises,” she says at one point.

“All she has to do is make them.” Imagine Sarah Palin given supernatural powers, waving her wand to turn critics to stone.

On the run from the Witch’s wolf minions, the siblings discover that they are the hu-
mams (“Sons of Adam”, “Daughters of Eve”) described in an ancient Narnian prophecy as saviors of the land. And Aslan—a Christ-like lion (not a leonine Christ)—is on the move as well, returning to Narnia with his own methods and motivations to defrost the frigid rule of his nemesis.

After being separated by Edmund’s childish cupidity, then reunited, the children take up arms in the defense of Narnia and Aslan’s cause, and begin to grow up at the same time. Betrayals, battles, and redemption ensure until Good wins out. End of story (until the next book in the series).

The stage version consolidates several of the scenes and settings from the already spare novel but gracefully retains the essence of the plot while turning it into a musical.

The music by Thomas Tierney and the lyrics by Ted Drachman are workmanlike but didn’t, for me at least, make this the most memorable musical imaginable. The morning after the performance I could only recall the tune and some lyrics from a single one of the songs (“You can’t imagine, how beautiful it was—you had to be there…” Mr. Tumnus sings about Narnia before the Witch.)

Still, the Berkeley Playhouse makes it a lively and accomplished production and you will remember the performances.

The standouts are Edmund and Lucy, played on the night we attended by Alexander Franklin and Dakota Dry. (Will Reicher and Maytal Bach alternate in the parts, so you may see them instead).

The eight-year-old Dry is a remarkable performer, both poised and emotive. The experienced 12 year-old Franklin—this is listed as his seventh Berkeley Playhouse production—has a thoroughly confident stage presence and convincingly conveys the most complex character in the show.

I thought Peter, the older brother, was directed as a bit of a prig, and Susan, the older sister, as something of a pacifist worrier, making them less than likeable characters in some respects. It’s initially hard to see even the simplest creatures flocking immediately to their cause. But they do play their parts well.

An adult cast with extensive acting credits backs up the four children. Several of them are Shotgun Players veterans on the local scene. Reid Davis and Mary Gibboney chew up the scenery (but, fortunately, not the Julia Morgan woodwork of the building) as the comic and lusty Mrs. and Mr. Beaver who bicker their way through the plot “Who ever heard of desperate beings fleeing for their lives with a sewing machine?!” he com-

plains.

Michael Barrett Austin is a whimsical and pensive Mr. Tumnus (rather oddly attired like an English toff), and Terry Rucker has a pitch-perfect cameo as Father Christmas and the lead, of course, in one of the more vigorous musical numbers.

As Aslan, Anthony Rollins-Mullens is capable and convincing and sings with a deep, mellow, voice. He also portrays the professor of Marbleton Manor at beginning and end of the play.

Chariisse Loriaux, the White Witch (and the straitlaced housekeeper Mrs. Macready) probably gets the most stage time of the adult performers and turns in an icily evil performance with a comic overlay.

I couldn’t quite get past her flowing white fur robes—I half expected her to break into an Andrew Lloyd Webber number at any moment—but, truth be told, after looking back at the book that’s sort of the way C.S. Lewis wrote the character.

There’s a skilled and versatile supporting ensemble of both adults and children. Almost all of them play at least two parts—some take on three—and they do it so well that you don’t really notice the slavering wolf soldier in one scene is a serene, suited, servant in the next.

Before the show I wondered how a small company could produce convincing sets for this mythical world, especially in the converted confines of the Julia Morgan originally a church sanctuary. I shouldn’t have worried. The performance is well staged, from snow flurries to battle scenes.

Outdoor Narnia—the setting for most scenes—is an abstract spiky white and gray (Winter), or multi shade green (Spring) backdrop on a central turntable, and smaller sets—such as the Beaver lodge or the cave of Mr. Tumnus—rotate into view on an outer ring. Freestanding windows, doors, and monumental wardrobe wheel in to create the England scenes at Marbleton Manor. It’s simple and clever.

The one drawback in production values at the performance I saw was that the amplification of the off-stage musicians occasionally competed with the singing and spoken dialog, particularly in the case of some of the younger singers. But that’s a minor issue in what is otherwise a creatively and capably staged show.

During that same show a cloudburst drummed down on the roof of the Julia Morgan Theater but it was not so much a distraction as a reminder that this was genuine community theater carrying on a long-standing Berkeley tradition.

I have wondered before if the current Berkeley Playhouse (founded in 2007) team realizes that nearly a century ago in the 1920s there was an original “Berkeley Playhouse”, as well as a later, “Berkeley Playmakers” company?

The first Berkeley Playhouse also performed in an old brown-shingle church, Berkeley’s original First Baptist Church that then stood Downtown on Allston Way, across from the present day Brower Center.

It relied on both acting professionals and talented locals, and some of its participants developed national reputations, including Everett Glass and Irving Pichel who later led the famed Pasadena Playhouse.

Community theater in those days was inspired by the fear that as motion pictures grew in popularity and traveling, professional, acting companies died out, there would be an end to the ancient tradition of live, local, drama performances.

The fact that this never came to pass is due to people like the leaders of both Berkeley Playhouses—then and now. Go see this show and be part of a Berkeley tradition that is older and richer than the current performers may know.

IF YOU GO…

“Narnia” plays through April 3 at the Julia Morgan Center for the Arts on College Avenue, at Derby. Shows are on Thursdays and Fridays at 7:30 pm, Saturday at 2 and 7:00, and Sunday at 11 and 3:30.

See berkeleyplayhouse.org for details and ticket prices. This Thursday, March 24, is a “half price / pay what you can” performance. You can either order tickets on line for $15, or pay what you can at the door if seats are still available.

The on-line ticket service lets you to see which seats are available at each remaining performance without committing to a purchase, and will also allow you to purchase specific reserved seats.

Around & About: Theater Review:
The Iliad by Inferno Theatre at Berkeley City Club
By Ken Bullock
Mon Mar 21 14:38:00 -0700 2011

Going to our seats in the Berkeley City Club, amid the pre-acting: the players making music on accordion, guitar, while someone’s bathing in a metal washtub, while
soldiers in camouflage trousers and camp followers sprawled out, lounging in the lull between battles... Then power chords on the guitar. A soldier brings in the weapons and gear: bamboo poles, parasols... another paws a woman... Drums, war cries, attitudinizing... Ululation of the women; the soldiers shimmy and gyrate in a provocative Oriental dance... Boots and cowboy hat in the hands of another, who puts them on, then dons shades, and rouges lips...

And the carnage begins: bamboo poles as pikes and javelins, parasols as shields... Still, not a word of dialogue. The figure in dark glasses licks the other end of a feather duster—and it becomes a deadly arrow, winging to its mark. Finally, two figures in gas masks stand alone, above figures stretched out again, but this time in death...

And the first word—an order: “Take off your mask!” Agamemnon and Achilles survey the damage on the plain of Troy... We should end the invasion and go home, declares Achilles—and his commander rages: The situation’s under control!

The Greeks have three myths of fracture between the West and East: the rape of Europa, the theft of the Golden Fleece—and Helen’s abduction, leading to the Trojan War...

Giulio Perrone’s Inferno Theatre remounts Homer’s tale of The Iliad, the wrath of Achilles, following its story, but confounding it with other, more contemporary burn-outs, invasions of futility in the Middle East... a common enough conceit these days, but Inferno achieves it without archness. Capturing the Homeric satire of the Olympian gods playing with mortals in a sarcastic current version of classical irony—when Athene cartwheels out to restrain Achilles from striking Agamemnon, tossing him like a wrestler, the hero looks at the svelte goddess in sunglasses, wondering who she is; “The Agency sent me,” she says, “I’m one of those you used to call gods”—and Achilles barks out: “Just a watchdog, then!”—Perrone’s script (he wrote, directed and designed the show, excepting Michael Palumbo’s splendid lights) and its stylized realization discover a dynamic flexibility that fuses modern mayhem and cynicism with the tragic cosmic perspective of antiquity into a volatile image... if just for a moment, the moment we’re watching.

Perrone, best-known in the Bay Area as a set designer, worked in Italy at Jerzy Grotowski’s theater research center, later directed Dell’Arte School—that excellent academy in movement theater arts—near Eureka, and staged Galileo’s Daughters last year at the City Club, Inferno’s first production.

That was a lovely, meandering show with a parabolic storyline; The Iliad is often frantic, with great dynamic shifts, relentlessly following Homer’s plot, in a race to the tragic conclusion. There’s time for an idyllic moment between Achilles and Patroclus before the slaughter, as Athene seduces Hector away from Andromache and back to the battleground in a dream; no time for the chase around the walls of Troy before the Grecian hero does the Trojan in.

An excellent international cast—Gulshirin Dubash, Julie Douglas, Evan Johnson, Helga Rosenfeld-Olsen and Jamie Van Camp—join Inferno’s spectacular Valentina Emeri and Simone Bloch in a constant quick-change of character to play a multitude. Inferno knows how to perform spectacle—not in the diluted Anglo-Saxon sense of a big, empty explosion of noise and lights, but in the sense of materializing a moving picture in the real space right in front of the spectators’ eyes, and in their nerves, their thinking... and the sheer joy of realizing that act, as much as any story or message.

There’s a transcendent moment—only a moment—right out of James Joyce’s 18th century inspiration, Giambattista Vico, or a modern philosopher like Bergson, when Calchas the soothsayer intones to the audience about new possibilities inserted in time, “images of new realities reflected in the infinite past”—and a brooding recitative over a sometimes wheezy, voiceless accadendo about the speaker going “to Ground Zero... still a terrible sight... but only two buildings—imagine having to restore a whole country.”

Against other tentative, loosely anachronistic adaptations of Homer’s merciful depiction of war—like ACT’s spoiled staging of Christopher Logue’s excellent poem in imitation of the blind bard—Inferno’s Iliad unites the remote spaces of past with the claustrophobic present in a real glimpse of humanity, not a fable of otherworldly figures from storybooks or TV and movie screens. In other words, real, immediate theater.

**Film Review: Worst in Show:**

A Pack of Humans in Dogged Pursuit of Glory

By Gar Smith

Mon Mar 21 14:50:00 -0700 2011

“This worst in Show” opens at Berkeley’s Elmwood Theater at 7PM on March 24 with a benefit screening for the Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society. Tickets (which include a chance to win a raffle) are $20 and can be ordered in advance online at www.worstinshowmovie.com.

The cinematic genre of “competition docs” appears boundless. Before the dawn of TV reality shows, there were documentaries celebrating the glory-and-heartbreak of spelling bees, elementary school dance-offs, crossword puzzle contests and international air guitar competitions. Now, dipping into this endless well of celluloid sociology, local filmmakers John Beck and Don Lewis have produced a critically praised “competition doc” that dares to train its lenses on Petaluma’s “World’s Ugliest Dog” competition—and the odd humans and animals that dwell therein. The poster dog for Petaluma’s 22-year-old competition is “Eyesore Sam,” a hideous hound whose appearance was not just ugly but bolt-out-of-bed-in-the-middle-of-the-night-screaming ugly. (Sam’s death of cardiac arrest made headlines around the world in 2006.) While this is clearly a dog-lovers’ film, the old refrain, “beauty is only skin deep,” will be put to the test with loving close-ups of breeds like the whisker-faced, wart-skinned Chinese crested hairless.

The title “Worst in Show” (a riff on Christopher Guest’s mockumentary “Best in Show”) could actually be the filmmakers’ subtle commentary on some of the human participants. This is Toddlers-with-Tiaras Syndrome for the four-footed. For two of the protagonists, it is clear that their animal companions are mainly being used as living trinkets—four-footed fashion accessories that serve to adorn somewhat empty lives. A petty competitive squabble that arises between two of the featured male competitors—Dane Andrew and Dawn Goehring (and their respective mini-mutts, “Rascal” and “Icky”)—throws a sour taste into the
Eye from the Aisle: HAIRSPRAY—bouffant, buoyant and a real pro show!

By John A. McMullen II
Tue Mar 22 20:45:00 -0700 2011

initially lighthearted foray into a world of happy hype and relaxed self-mockery. Dane comes across as a particularly sad and tiresome promoter who has condemned himself to walk the earth spouting sound-bytes in an endless attempt to score yet another appearance on “The Today Show.” Goehring is a perfect match, dour and defensive, snapping and nipping at his opponent’s heels.

With tattoos covering his arms, neck and both sides of a shaved skull topped with a gelled Mohawk, a third competitor named Miles Egstad, is the oddest-looking contestant but he turns out to be the most well-adjusted. Unlike wound-up Dane and uptight Dawn, Miles is relaxed and jovial. He relates to Pabst, his overbite-ugly boxer pet, as a companion, not as a ticket to celebrity.

“Worst in Show” raises a number of ethical questions as competitors resort to ploys ranging from electronic vote-rigging and attempted ballot-buying to the promotion of animals with grotesque and/or heart-tugging deformities. (There is a dark suggestion that some of these debilities may have been human-induced.)

But the film saves the best for last as the latest Ugly Dog Contest is won by a back-of-the-pack upset named “Princess Abby.” Abby was a rescue dog adopted by Kathleen Francis, an impoverished K-Mart clerk from Clearlake. Francis’ husband had committed suicide after discovering he had throat cancer, leaving her alone. Finding Abby helped Kathleen survive her human loss. And, in a surprising turn of events, when Abby takes the stage at the World’s Ugliest Dog Contest and “walks the red carpet,” the world stops and turns in her direction. The aftermath is just tear-jerkingly wonderful.

Hard to believe, but this feature was made for a scant $5,000. (There should be a special film award for that.) “Worst of Show” also boasts a great soundtrack and the last film appearance by screen legend Jane Russell.

If your spirits need a lift, I recommend CCMT’s HAIRSPRAY at Lesher Center in Walnut Creek.

It’s a buoyant musical about integrating an American Bandstand-like TV show in Baltimore in 1962.

Our heroine is an overweight, bouffanted, good-hearted girl with loads of talent supported by her much overweight good-heart ed mom—a cross-dressing role written for Divine by its author John Waters of “Pink Flamingo” fame. African-Americans—Negroes was the word then—had one day a month to be on the show: “Negro Day”—and whites and blacks did not dance together to “race” music, much less kiss, much less date, much less….

The film version featured John Travolta as mom, Christopher Walken as the dad, Michelle Pfeiffer as the Wicked Producer, Zach Efron as the heartthrob, and John Marsden as Corny Collins, emcee of the “Corny Collins Dance Show.” When there is a recent film version of a musical, the company has their work cut out for them to overcome the inevitable comparisons, and CCMT does it well. The film is one of my campy favorites, but if I had paid money to see this stage version, I would have been doubly pleased.

The talent is amazing; 300 auditioned for it, and they got the crème to pick from. The chorus is outstanding, the featured performers have professional voices with lots of character, and, for the most part, ain’t bad at all. The choreography is creative and adept: moving 40 is no mean feat, and Jennifer Perry has whipped them into an ensemble to be proud of. With few levels to use for variety and certain hazards to avoid, her use of the stage and final-beat tableaux are object lessons in musical theatre choreography.

It doesn’t come “bang!” out of the gate at you, but gives us one exceptional number after another building to a show-stopping number where the applause starts before the singing stops by Erica Richardson who plays Motormouth Mabel (played by Queen Lati-fah in the film) whose Aretha Franklin-style gospel-reminiscent, Detroit-sound vocalizing brings down the house.

Scott Wittman’s lyrics are witty and touching, and Marc Shaiman’s music has a good beat and you can dance to it—I’d give it a 95! (Ask your mom to explain; well, maybe your grandma.)

The sets are award-worthy, with the early 60’s cardboard-cutout for the scenery wagons they push on and off, but it’s the backdrops that support the effort wonderfully by invoking a variety of time-specific motifs. It is camp—remember it’s John Waters—so the whole feel is a little cartoon-y.

The costumes take the cake—and what fun to work with costumes from that gaudy cross-over moment from the ’50s to the 60’s just before America lost its innocence on a November afternoon in Dallas.

There are some pitfalls. It’s always a conundrum where to put the orchestra. You want some scenes to be played way down stage on the apron as close to the audience as you can get them, but the orchestra lives there in the pit. The design has two large rhomboids cut out of each side down stage for the pit with run-way in between and about a yard of playing space downstage. The dancers/actors/singers cavort nimbly around this scary hazard, but this eye from the aisle grimaced in fear for their safety more than once, which would burst my bubble and bring me back from their world to mine.

There are moments of acting that are too presentational, which the director should have labored to correct, and some of the featured performers act a lot better when they are singing than when they are acting, some with a noticeable inability to time a punch line. But these are easily overlooked with the amazing singing and dancing talent displayed in this feel-good musical about the time when the moral good was clear-cut, and if you were for segregation, you were the bad guy.

And for those of you familiar with the film version of the musical, the second act is not the same, and you’ll have discussions over which is a better denouement.

The African-American performers kick it up a notch when it’s their moment. Their singing is more powerful, the dancing is (sorry) much better, and you kind of wish every day were “Negro Day.” (There were regrettably more African-Americans on stage than in the audience.) In one short number the Motown girl group “The Dy-
namites” of Angel Burgess, Elaine Johnson & Lillian Kurtz, rocks the house with their vocal fireworks.

Our heroine Tracy played by Victoria Morgan is the linchpin; the role was written for a girl with hefty talent and figure, and she fills it to the brim. Edna, her mom, is played by Marcus Klinger, who, to his and the director’s credit, affects no falsetto, but you believe he’s the mom. There is too much talent to name them all, but mention is in order for the duet by Jeff Draper and Marcus Klinger, Jason Hite’s heartthrob Elvis, and the multiple roles of the Authority Figures Derek Travis Collard and particularly Suzie Shepard.

When I came home from the theatre, I sat down to get some ideas written out, but first I checked the NY Times online edition to see what’s going on and ironically, I found this headline on the front page: “RACE REMIXED: Shift Seen in Deep South’s Views on Mixed Marriage -- ‘Census data suggests that in the deep South, historically hostile to mixed-race couples, attitudes are shifting.’” by Susan Saulny. Fifty years can make a difference, and this will remind you—or educate you—about the good fight that was fought; hell, next thing you know, we’ll have a mixed race president!

HAIRSPRAY Based on a film by John Waters, music by Marc Shaiman and lyrics by Scott Wittman
Presented by Contra Costa Musical Theatre
At the Lesher Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek
Through April 16, 2011
http://www.ccmt.org/
Directed by Scott Denison, Choreographed by Jennifer Perry, Musical Direction by Mark Hanson, Production Managements by Dustin Riggs & Suzanne Brandt, Directed by Scott Denison, Choreographed by Jennifer Perry, Musical Direction by Mark Hanson, Costumes by Marianna Ford, Hair & Wig design by Judy Disbrow, Properties design by Debbie Shelley, Scenic Consultant Kelly Tige, TD Russ Milligan, Sound design Jeff Mockus; Stage Manager Sofia Dertimanis.

WITH: Victoria Morgan (Tracy), Marcus Klinger (Edna), Jeffrey Draper (Wilber), Noel Anthony (Corny Collins), Lynda Di-Vito (Velma), Jasmin Williams (Little Inez), Erica Richardson (Motormouth Mabel), Jason Hite (Link), Britt Danielle (Amber), Emily Trumble (Penny), Isaiah Tyrelle (Sea-weed), (Derek Travis Collard Male Authority), Suzie Shepard (Female Authority), and Angel Burgess, Elaine Johnson & Lillian Kurtz (as the Dynamites).

Male Ensemble: Ben Bogen (Sketch), Tony Conaty (Frankie), Lavale-William Davis (Duane), Alex Moore (Rocky), Anthony Finley (Thad), Justin Madfes (IQ), Derek Miller (Fender), Jason Pedroza (Brad), Brian Sterling (Gilbert), Kyle Valentine (Swing/Ensemble).

Female Ensemble: Amanda Denison (Louanne), Ariel Ford (Tammy), Clarissa Forney (Tina), Aubrey Greenan (Shelly), Taylor Jones (Lorraine), Lillian Kurtz (Gloria), Adella Lott (Ronda), Caitlin O’Leary (Brenda), Lauren Rosi (Sandy), Kimille Williams-Stingly (Natalie), Catherine Williamson (Annette), Jessica Boynton (Swing/Ensemble).