

Fiction: Lyrics of the Past

by Jim Feast

Joanna Gunderson, *Night* (Red Dust, 2007)

Jordan Zinovich, *The Company I Keep* (Ekstasis Editions, 2004)



Two recent books, *Night* by Joanna Gunderson and *The Company I Keep* by Jordan Zinovich, share a peculiar affinity. They both feature lyrical dramas that evoke valued figures from the past, bringing them to life powerfully but in obliterated form.

Take Gunderson's plays in *Night*. They are composed of quotations drawn equally from famous sources, such as the Bible, the poems of Anna Akhmatova, and the speeches of Audre Lourde, and from overheard fragments of friends' conversation (all copiously footnoted). To say that she is using quotations, though, is giving a false impression, since they are really snippets. From Osip Mandelstam, for instance, she quotes such lines as "on the bitter stairs," "eyes that were," and "someone to."

Moreover, to make the work even more complex, while these bits and pieces are the substance of the play *Fire* as performed, in the book they appear in a left-hand column of the page. The right side is given to a gloss. So, to match the first

line quoted (“on the bitter stairs,”) we read on the right, “A conversation on the bitter stairs’ O.M.”

On the surface, this use of quotes seems a daffy, even belligerent, procedure. After all, at least in the performed plays, the snippets give little flavor of the authors and seem, thus, rather disrespectful. However, this aspect of the work is downplayed by the way the various voices criss-cross in the text to establish two competing (yet also complementary) themes that give a shadowy continuity to the material.

Each play focuses on a displaced, subjugated minority and its spokespeople. *Night* concentrates on U.S. black writers, racism, and slavery; *Fire*, on Russian Jews at the time of Stalin’s rise. In the latter, by braiding together disparate passages, she creates a swelling threnody of lost hopes and half-submerged moments of joy even in cheerless political surroundings.

The second inclusion that (in a lesser key) defines and unifies the pieces is her use of memories of friends whose thoughts ratify and make current the precarious situation of the older generation. So, again in *Fire*, the ongoing existence of anti-Semitism is captured when a friend recalls, “was sitting on the steps//they said to me//You killed Jesus Christ//went back upstairs//crying.”

With these two integrations, Gunderson’s use of piecemeal, scavenged bits leads not to anarchy but to mood pieces that are somber while being morally and aesthetically captivating.

Zinovich’s *The Company I Keep* is filled with many fine lyric effusions: sometimes droll, sometimes thought-provoking, the work is capped off by a long play (and an appended CD of its performance), John Chapman’s *Harvest*. (Chapman is the real last name of the legendary Johnny Appleseed.) Here, too, collage is the organizational principle, though it is handled more conventionally by shifting between four textual registers: a voice describing types of apples, a narrator describing Chapman’s trials, Chapman himself, and a voice giving route directions, though not the type found on MapQuest. For instance, “Hwy 29 Springfield//(outskirts) look left grain elevator lit up//shave-ice stand.”

Where Gunderson presents a lyric evocation, Zinovich's *Harvest* is a fable. Chapman's journeys through a motorized, urbanized world in which prairies give way to places where "the city lights shoot out beneath my wings ...From the air //water glimmers like burn scars." It's as if Appleseed were our new eco-friendly Sisyphus, attempting to find a place amid all the granite and asphalt to plant one more tree.

Chapman's voice guides the story, such as it is, proceeding through magical encounters and rollicking ruminations, while the other registers provide goofy punctuation that grows increasingly more aberrant as the apple-seeder's mission goes further and further off the rails. The directions seem to get lost themselves and the fruits described become as industrialized as the spaces he is moving through. The Chernobyl apple, for instance, sometimes will "glow and strobe."

Two very different writers, then, both well worth consulting, who have been drawn to a similar technique to grasp the past, which, no denying, both bring to us as vividly as if they were pacing shattered worlds.

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