

# Globe Review

**Television** Duchovny returns with X-rated tales of life in the Hollywood trenches R3

PACK RAT » THERE'S MONEY IN THE ATTIC

## The end of a legend

A U.S. millionaire breaks up the famed Vancouver Collection of pristine 1940s comic books

BY KERRY GOLD VANCOUVER

A U.S. millionaire, who's well-known in comic-book circles, has auctioned off pieces of a famous collection that originally came out of a Vancouver man's estate more than a decade ago.

Steve Geppi of Baltimore purchased the comic-book collection about four years ago from Vancouver antiques dealer Chris Bell for nearly \$500,000. Since Bell bought the collection in 1996 from an estate sale, it has become known among aficionados as the Vancouver Collection and is prized for the immaculate condition of the comic-book pages. The pages are so white they look as if they were just printed.

Geppi's auction was conducted over several days last week in Baltimore. The relatively small collection, composed of 253 comic books dated between 1939 and 1953, is better known to U.S. collectors than it is here in Canada. In the auction catalogue it says that "Canada's naturally cool climate" allowed the comic books to "remain in the gleaming, near-pristine condition in which we find them today."

"In terms of page quality, it's the best of all time," says Barry Sandoval, director of comic-book operations for Dallas-based Heritage Auction Galleries, which handled the sale.

Geppi thinks there are likely more comic books north of the border. "I hope the publicity that comes out of this story brings out the rest of the comic books, if there are any to bring out," he says. "This Vancouver Collection lent itself from the mid- to late-forties, and I would love nothing better than to discover there was an early forties period out there."

Geppi is CEO of Diamond Comic Distributors (the largest comic distributor in the world), the owner of Geppi's Entertainment Museum and a part-owner of the Baltimore Orioles baseball club. But his greatest passion is for comic books from the forties.

He started out as a mailman but famously turned his passion for collecting comic books and other pop culture kitsch into an empire. "You can't do much in comics without crossing Geppi at some point," says Vancouver-based comic-book expert Leonard Wong.

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Originally discovered in a cardboard box at a Vancouver estate sale, this 1948 copy of *Namora* sold at a Baltimore auction for \$13,800 (U.S.).  
HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERY

CULTURE

## Chelsea mornings coming to an end?



SIMON HOUP  
NEW YORK DIARY

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On a muggy afternoon last week, Chicago painter Susan Olmetti crouched on a sidewalk along West 23rd Street and applied some swirls to a pop art canvas she'd propped up against a long-shuttered storefront. A handful of completed pieces stood drying in the summer haze. Olmetti has spent the last couple of months on this stretch of sidewalk just west of Seventh Avenue, using it as a handy combination of studio and salesroom. "It's euphoric," she explained. "Being in the street, with people."

Nobody takes much notice of such things in this part of town, for a few feet to the right of Olmetti lay the entrance to her temporary home: the Hotel Chelsea, the dotty dowager that has housed thousands of artists since the middle of the last century.

Popularly known as the Chelsea Hotel, it's where Arthur Miller wrote *After the Fall*, where Arthur C. Clarke wrote the screenplay for 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, where Bob Dylan penned *Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* and married Sara Lownds, where Leonard Cohen had a tasty encounter with Janis Joplin that spurred him to write about something happening to him on an unmade bed; he remembered it well.

Aaron Copland, Patti Smith, Tom Waits, and countless others stayed here. (Much life, and some death, too: Dylan Thomas died of alcohol poisoning here; Sid Vicious's girlfriend Nancy Spungen came to a violent end in Room 100, later renamed Room 103; Andy Warhol survived a shooting by Valerie Solanas in the lobby.) Of 250 rooms spread across 12 floors, about 60 per cent are rented out to long-term residents; the rest are by the night at rates that begin around \$120 (U.S.) and rise quickly. Its current motto is "a rest stop for rare individuals."

Many of those rare individuals are scared, though, that the hotel's quirky, artist-friendly nature may now be in danger. In June, Stanley Bard, the general manager who has overseen the Chelsea for more than 50 years, was removed as part of a long-running legal dispute between himself and other members of the hotel's board. Bard had been the one who interviewed prospective long-term renters. (Contrary to the myth of cheap rent at the Chelsea, nowadays a small furnished space with little room for possessions could easily run you \$2,500 or more a month.) A canny curator of humans, Bard created a rotating series of unusual families and never stopped promoting the work of his artistic residents.

He's been replaced by the slick operators at BD Hotels.

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ROCK MEMOIRS

## Richards? Check. Clapton? Check. But what about Geddy Lee?

BY MATT HARTLEY

"My life's an open book, you read it on the radio," begins a famous song by seminal Canadian rocker Neil Young. That may be so, but given the current interest in rock 'n' roll memoirs, it's safe to assume Young's fans would be happy to read the whole story, should he ever choose to write it down.

Last month, Keith Richards, the seemingly indestructible Rolling Stones guitarist, received a reported \$7-plus-million



Will Neil Young, right, follow Keith Richards and pen his autobiography? DENIS BALIBOUSE/REUTERS; AARON HARRIS/CP



advance to recount his hedonistic experiences in the world's most durable rock band. Slowhand himself, Eric Clapton, got a reputed \$5-million from a publisher last year to write his memoirs, and Bob Dylan's *Chronicles: Volume One* is a bestseller.

The flashy advances, and the seemingly insatiable appetite for such titles, raise the question: Which rock memoirs are Canadians hungry for?

The prospect of private reflections about pivotal moments in the artist's career

coming directly from the source is tantalizing to fans and publishers alike. However, the reality is that for every introspective collection like *Chronicles*, there exists a work like *Inside Out*, by former Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason, which fails to offer much insight and glosses over many of the tour-bus legends fans are itching to know.

What matters for publishers is whether or not the artist will really open up and recount all those dirty tour stories.

» SEE 'MEMOIRS' PAGE R2



## ROYAL ALEXANDRA THEATRE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

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THEATRE » REVIEW

# Hostage crisis electrifies new Stratford

**PENTECOST**  
 Directed by Mladen Kiselov  
 Written by David Edgar  
 Starring Jonathan Goad,  
 John Koensgen, Lucy Peacock  
 At the Studio Theatre in Stratford,  
 Ont., until Sept. 21  
 (1-800-567-1600).  
 Rating: ★★★

BY KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE

There's a hostage situation at the Studio Theatre in Stratford and the man holding a gun to our heads and, in his own words, taking "our times by the throat" is called David Edgar. Do not – I repeat, do not – negotiate with this British intellectual terrorist. Perhaps now is the time to experience the Stockholm syndrome in all its mind-blowing glory. Enter his world, sympathize with his many causes and, when the time comes, fight for them yourself.

No jackets and no weapons required. All you need to do is to buy a ticket to director Mladen Kiselov's powerful production of Edgar's *Pentecost* (1994), empty your bladder before this three-hour saga about art, nationalism and an actual hostage crisis in an East European church begins, and watch. Physical effort is not required; mental workout expected.

It begins with art. In a deserted church in an unidentified Balkan country, Gabriella, a local art historian (Lucy Peacock), has uncovered a fresco whose provenance may change western civilization as we know it. (Think art mystery à la *Da Vinci Code* except smarter, better written and a lot more entertaining.)



**Pentecost is a three-hour saga that explores art, nationalism, globalization and third-world human trafficking.** DAVID HOU/STRATFORD FESTIVAL

If it can be proved that the fresco predates the work of Italian master Giotto by at least a century, then this war-plagued country and not Italy is the true birthplace of the Renaissance. A quiet British historian, Oliver (John Koensgen), who believes in the fresco's authenticity, and a go-getting American scholar, Leo (Jonathan Goad), who doubts it, soon lock horns. What follows is a series of escalating situations that begin predictably enough with a squabble between the Ortho-

dox and Catholic priests over proprietorship of said fresco and end with a bloody hostage crisis when a group of refugees seek shelter and passage to the West inside the church.

The above is merely the plot outline on which Edgar expertly hangs – and sometimes indiscriminately dumps – a barrage of ideas. Topping the list is an examination of nationalism in 1990s Europe where the divide between east and west is easing just as racial tensions are rising. Yet if the first act is theoretical, the

second is practical. The refugees-turned-captors are the living embodiments of both specific geopolitical changes and the rising tide of globalization – one world under its self-appointed gods, America as country and English as a language.

Although written before 9/11, *Pentecost* speaks to a world changed forever by that day with startling relevance.

With a cast of 22 fighting for space, the tiny Studio Theatre is as crowded physically as it is intellectually. The director,

however, is in full control. Kiselov's production, designed with élan and authentic period details by Eo Sharp, is wild and occasionally, purposefully chaotic. But there's rigour in his understanding of ideas and compassion for those who find themselves either liberated or terrorized by them. Mladen's job is all the more impressive since Edgar doesn't develop characters as expertly as he does intellectual content. To wit: There's a half-baked attempt at romance between Gabriella and Oliver that comes out of, and goes, nowhere. Still, under Mladen's fluid direction, Peacock, Goad and Koensgen bring out their characters' shades and colours while Adrienne Gould as the Palestinian refugee Yasmin is, well, captivating in more ways than one.

Of course, the irony of a play about globalization and third-world human trafficking played primarily by a white cast should not go unnoticed. For now, productions like *Pentecost* and *The Odyssey*, which opened two days earlier at the same space, are bridges to the new Stratford: internationalist, politicized, and demanding of cast and audience alike. The Studio Theatre, a Richard Monette creation, is becoming the festival's most valuable artistic asset. Whatever else Monette got wrong throughout his 14-year tenure as artistic director, he certainly called that one right. In an ideal world, the festival's most ambitious work wouldn't be confined to its smallest space, but perhaps that too will change under new management.

## Cool climate credited for paper preservation

So it was not surprising that Bell approached Geppi when he decided to sell off his prized collection. Bell had discovered the comics while searching an estate sale for antiques and collectibles suitable for his shop, Affordable 2nd Thoughts. Bell believes that the deceased owner of the items had once owned a bookstore, but he wouldn't give any other information about the man.

When he opened the box of comic books, he was so amazed by their pristine condition he thought they might be reproductions. When he realized the comic books were originals – they had been meticulously stored between newspapers and left untouched since 1955 – he felt his heart race.

"I made them an offer and that was only after seeing the first few books on the stack," says Bell. "I was beside myself because you don't normally see this type of quality materialize. ... I made an offer of whatever I had on me, which was just over \$3,000. [The sellers] were absolutely ecstatic, and pretty much thinking I was insane, because that is still a lot of money for a box of comic books."

Bell kept the collection for eight years, and eventually had it graded and pedigreed. He says that when he did go shopping around for a purchaser a few years ago, the collection attracted several interested parties, including Geppi.

"Steve had caught wind of it, contacted me, and sent one of his appraisal fellows up to view the collection, to authenticate it. He was very excited when he was here," says Bell. "We talked for several hours over the phone. He contacted me back in the morning and offered \$500,000 [U.S.]. That was my minimum. We were actually looking for \$1-million [U.S.] on the collection."

Bell refused the offer, but says that several months later he needed money for another deal, so he contacted Geppi again and received \$375,000 (U.S.) as part of a new deal.

Bell was surprised to hear that the bulk of the collection had been auctioned off last weekend. He is hoping to one day purchase back most of it for a collectibles museum he plans to open in Vancouver.

It is unclear what the Vancouver Collection sold for because Geppi only auctioned off part of it, and he sold some premium books separately in private deals. But Sandoval said that a total of 205 books from the collection have been auctioned for nearly \$145,000 (U.S.). One comic book, a 1948 *Namora*, was auctioned off for \$13,800 (U.S.).

It is a modestly sized collection for an auction house that once set a Guinness World Record for auctioning off more than \$5-million in comic books (including those owned by actor Nicolas Cage). But Sandoval said that he seldom sees comic books of such quality.

"The only reason people aren't more frenzied about it is that Geppi just bought all of them and pretty much just held on to all of them," he says. "There wasn't the word of mouth."

Geppi doesn't need the publicity when there is currently such a driven comic-book market. He just wants to add to his collection. "I remember the thrill I got when I got them from Chris," he says. "This collection was genuinely fulfilling. It was not a disappointment."

"And it designates Vancouver as a spot in our little world that brought forward one of the greatest collections," Geppi added. "If I could encourage people to scour their attics and basements and whatever, there may be a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I'd certainly love them to ring my number."

FROM PAGE R1 » HOUP

## Chelsea hotel an art oasis in clean and corporate New York

The Manhattan company owns 15 high-end properties, including the trendy Chambers, Mercer, and Maritime hotels. In a press release, the Chelsea's board promised BD would undertake some modernization projects (plumbing, wiring, mechanical, etc.) while "ensuring that the hotel's historic charm and character is both preserved and enhanced." But any change is enough to worry the Chelsea denizens.

In an essay entitled *The Chelsea Affect* published in the Summer 2002 edition of *Granta*, Arthur Miller recalled that "it was a general rule that when something weird happened, nobody – not Stanley, not the desk man or the phone operator or [the building engineer] – would ever really know quite what it was all about, and so a kind of fog of exhausted enquiry suffused the place."

Nothing's changed. Now that Stanley and his son David have been removed (though not even removed, exactly: they still live on the premises, and still chat daily with the residents during morning rounds in the lobby), nobody seems to know who's in charge or what changes are in store. Newspaper reports have carried juicy stories about one or two of the



**Ethan Hawke sits in the staircase of the Chelsea hotel in New York. He has lived there and used it as a film set.** Linda Troeller

board members receiving mob-like threats (packages containing the head of a fish; a bag of manure). One resident's blog breathlessly reports every real and perceived slight by new management.

The overwhelming sense is that the board may have legal power over the hotel, but it's the residents who really control the place through a higher moral authority. They have rallied the world's press (a German reporter prowled the lobby last week; the Germans love the Chelsea) and procured support from some of its more famous alumni including

Christo and Jeanne-Claude; Ethan Hawke, who lived there and also made *Chelsea Walls* on location, there, stopped by for a chat with new management.

Amid the sense of impending doom, some of its current residents are trying to remind the world why the Chelsea is unique. Writer Ed Hamilton (the breathless blogger) will publish a history of the place in October under the title *Legends of the Chelsea Hotel: Living with the Artists and Outlaws of New York's Rebel Mecca*. (One chapter is a ghost story about a séance he partic-

ipated in with writer Susan Swan, in Room 831, where Thomas Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*.)

Photographer Linda Troeller, who has lived at the hotel on and off since 1994, is coming out with a book of pictures and reminiscences by a broad swath of residents past and present titled *Atmosphere: An Artist's Memoir of the Chelsea Hotel, NYC*.

When I dropped by to see Troeller in her room last week, she was playing a CD of jazz singer Sathima Bea Benjamin on her compact stereo system. (Most everything in Troeller's 150-square-foot room is compact, except for her own photographs on the walls, which are large and radiant. She has a small flat-screen TV attached to one wall, just above a bar fridge.)

Troeller mentioned that Benjamin, who is a hotel resident, had been at a party she'd thrown the other night in her room. (A tray of clean champagne flutes stood on a tray atop her desk, anticipating the next soirée.) There are frequent parties in the rooms: book launches, art shows, salons. "I wonder if there are so many things going on here that I hardly have time to go to other things," she admitted. "With the people I know in the

building, I have a full cultural experience."

It's true, she acknowledged, that the hotel no longer carries the same cachet it once did in the worlds of art and literature; the power centres of those worlds are now so diffused. "But this is one human piece of the culture scene that still provides the dream of connection. If I couldn't be here, I would hope to go to MacDowell Colony," she said.

In Troeller's book, pianist Bruce Levingston is quoted as saying of the Chelsea: "It is the only residence I know where your neighbours leave you notes saying they 'loved the Chopin you were playing around two in the morning' and mean it."

Troeller also quotes New York Times Magazine writer James Traub, who captures the essential irony of the Chelsea as it now exists. "It's strange, but fitting, that a venue so famously outré is at the same time as venerable as an old duchess," he writes. "Everything familiar in Times Square is long gone, for who can afford the rent in the crossroads of the universe? But the Chelsea, off in its own world, soldiers on behind its stupendous brick and iron battlement, sheltering its eccentric brotherhood."

FROM PAGE R1 » MEMOIRS

## No big payday for Canadian rock bios

"The first thing you ask is: 'Are you going to be candid in the book?'" said Doug Pepper, president and publisher of McClelland and Stewart.

"Obviously the more candid they are the more news stories are going to pop up on the cover of the newspaper. You know a motivated author when you see them, and you know an author who's phoning it in."

Neil Young would likely be the most sought after Canadian artist publishers would want for a memoir, Pepper

said, speaking hypothetically. Geddy Lee, lead singer of Rush, would be another attractive choice.

"I think sales-wise [a Geddy Lee autobiography] could do pretty well. But if he hasn't done an autobiography at this point, it's probably because he hasn't wanted to," he said.

For Kim McArthur, president and publisher of McArthur & Co., singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell would be at the top of her wish list. Having already published Randy Bachman's autobiography and with Natalie MacMaster's memoirs

set for release this fall, McArthur admits to having a soft spot for music memoirs from Canadian artists.

Jack David, publisher for Toronto-based ECW Press, has published three books by former Rush drummer Neil Peart. It's not about how many fans an artist has, but rather the depth and devotion of that fan base, he said.

His ideal musician-author would be someone like Barenaked Ladies singer Steven Page.

"He has a strong green/environmental side to him," David

said. "He likes being in the public eye with his CBC show and he's got things to say ... he's always been a guy who I thought could do a pretty good book, not just a celebrity bio, and probably a guy who would write the book himself."

Different stars decide to try their hand at writing books for different reasons.

"Having worked on a lot of these memoirs and autobiographies, it's usually because somebody needs the money, or they feel that their star is fading in some way and they'd

like to recoup it," Pepper said. On the other hand, Pepper noted, Canadian artists have a reputation for honesty and outspokenness, which would likely make for great stories.

However, most Canadian artists can forget about the kind of multimillion-dollar advances showered on Richards and Clapton, publishers say. Even such sought-after Canadian musicians as Joni Mitchell and Neil Young would garner advances in the six-figure league, and would only snare upward of \$1-million from a very generous publisher.



# TITANIC

## THE ARTIFACT EXHIBITION

Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition takes you on a journey back in time to experience the legend of *Titanic* like never before. The galleries in this fascinating exhibition feature over 250 real artifacts recovered from the ocean floor along with room re-creations and personal stories; each highlighting a different chapter in the compelling story of *Titanic*'s maiden voyage. Also playing at the Shoppers Drug Mart® OMNIMAX® Theatre - TITANICA, an IMAX® film. Journey to the final resting place of the world's most famous shipwreck.