

Literary Notes/ John Berendt's Book Reveals the Dramatic and Comic Social Dance of Venice

City of Falling Angels with a Surreal Touch

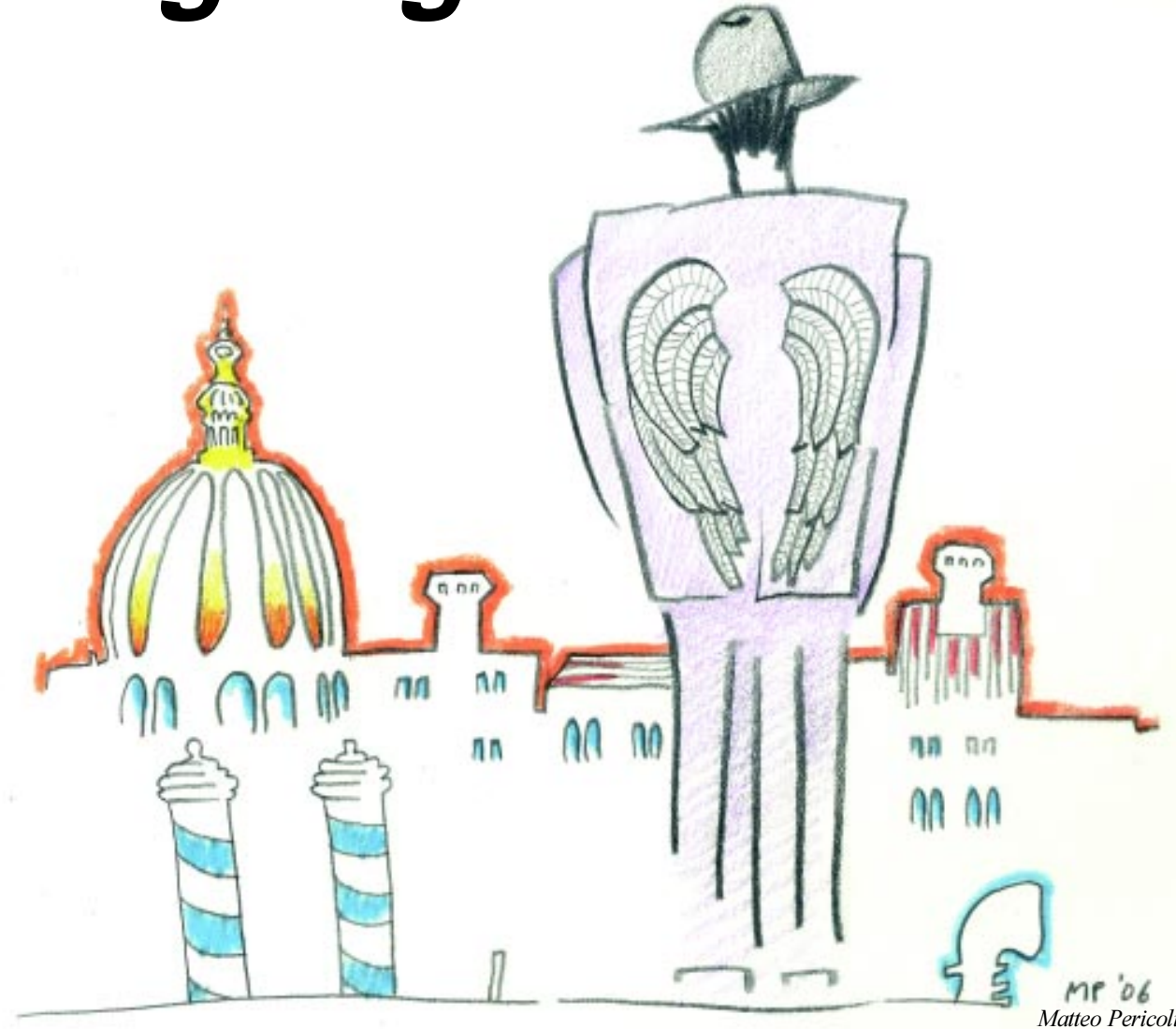
by Michael Moore

Look up the next time you stroll down an Italian street, two new books by American authors would seem to warn. Otherwise you might get hit in the head by a piece of plummeting masonry. Decadence has long been associated with Italian life, almost as a facile, reflexive gesture, yet it still seems ominous that the adjective "falling" should appear in the titles of two recent offerings from American presses. John Berendt, in *The City of Falling Angels* and Dan Hofstadter in *Falling Palace: A Romance of Naples*, tread cautiously through two Italian cities, Naples and Venice. However different their subjects, perspective, and style may be, however, they share a vision of an Italy losing not its foundations, but its façade. This week, we focus on Berendt's novel and we will turn our attention to Hofstadter's in our next issue. Berendt set up house in Venice only three days after the fire that destroyed the Gran Teatro La Fenice, the city's beautiful and beloved opera house. A criminal investigation revealed that the cause was arson, leading to a trial that dragged on for years. Perhaps the bigger scandal was the competition for the rebuilding of La Fenice. The contract was awarded to one company, and then, after a complaint had been lodged, it was rescinded, given to a second firm, and after further delays, take over by the city, which entrusted the construction to yet a third contractor. The burning and proverbial rebirth of La Fenice provide Berendt not only with a great story, but also with a canvas on which to paint his own portrait of life in La Serenissima.



The City of Falling Angels by John Berendt (Penguin)

Author of the best-selling non-fiction mystery, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and former editor of *New York* magazine, Berendt has a knack for befriending people in high places. For his earlier work, he managed to penetrate the world of an eccentric gay



Matteo Pericoli

millionaire in Savannah, Georgia, encouraging the people he met to spill their guts while revealing precious little about himself. On the other side of the ocean, frequenting a more exclusive society and speaking a foreign tongue, he manages the same trick all over again. Barely has he descended from a water taxi when he finds himself

ushered into the best salons of Venice. For the benefit of the ordinary reader, he draws a pointed if gratuitous comparison—"Peggy Guggenheim was never accepted by members of Venetian society"—before congratulating himself on his own invitation to a formal Carnival costume ball.

This very ability to gain access, however, is the mark of a great journalist, unhampered by the need to rely on second-hand sources. Berendt tracks down the protagonists of his complex story like a bloodhound. The famous glassblower who witnessed the fire from his living room window. The prosecutor in charge of the investigation. The electricians accused of setting the fire, their families, and their defense attorneys. Into the story he weaves tangential episodes that heighten his vision of the city as one big opera house, albeit with a smoking hole in the middle. The purloining of the papers of Ezra Pound. The escapades of an appallingly kitsch painter of surrealist cityscapes. The suicide of a local poet and the controversy surrounding his will. The power struggle at the top of the New York-based Save Venice Foundation.

Paradoxically, there seems to be very little appreciation of opera in this 398-page book. Even more paradoxical, I would say, since "operatic" is the word that best describes both its strengths and its weaknesses. The cast of characters is filled with heroic tenors, steely sopranos, vindictive baritones, demented mezzo sopranos, and solemn basses. Its epic story describes the last descendants of ancient families under siege by nouveau riche claimants. The choral sighs of ordinary citizens are punctuated by heroic calls to action. Sadly, there is no great love story. Operatic, also, is the sheer credulity that Berendt demands. He is constantly running into the various protagonists of the story as if by sheer coincidence. The dialogue is stilted, as if Venetians spoke pidgin English. Lengthy exchanges are reported "verbatim"—even when the author could not possibly have been present (was he in both Manhattan's Rainbow Room and Venice at the same time?). Not to mention the language barrier represented by his admittedly elementary knowledge of Italian. In the interests of realism—a goal strangely alien from the poetics of non-fiction novelists—should we know whether he had an interpreter present?

Although *The City of Falling Angels* never quite coheres into a novel, it assembles some remarkable chapters, each a masterpiece of reportage. In the final pages, at the inauguration of the rebuilt La Fenice, surrounded by the characters whose lives he has so graciously dissected, the author miraculously weaves together the various strands of his story, and bids adieu to what had been a tragedy with a deft comic touch.

(by Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno, continued from p.1)

Our scientific backgrounds helped us write this script. But, after the first draft, we decided to assemble a focus group of the very best minds, have them read "Watermark," and provide feedback that would inform our second draft. This gathering became a Wingspread Conference hosted by the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin. Wingspread has an auspicious history, having served as the birthplace of both National Public Radio and the National Endowment for the Arts.

For three days last July, we gathered 30 scientists, environmentalists, historians, journalists, policy makers, and film industry representatives to generate recommendations for the "Watermark" screenplay and to discuss the single most underlying threat to flooding in all coastal cities—sea level rise due to global warming. We learned how coastal cities are canaries in the coal mine; that is, they're very sensitive to fluctuations in sea level rise. Therefore, careful attention must be paid to New Orleans and Venice, particularly in deciding how to deal with their problems, since their successes or failures become models for other coastal cities.

During the Wingspread Conference, Dr. John Day, a biologist from Louisiana State University, who had worked in both the wetlands of New Orleans and Venice, pointed out many parallels between the two cities: 1) Both have disastrous flooding issues; 2) Both have enormous wetlands loss; 3) Both require levees or "dams;" and, 4) Culturally, both are linked by their famous pre-Lenten celebrations—Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Carnevale in Venice. With such striking similarities, a resounding recommendation from the participants was for "Watermark's" first scenes to be set in New Orleans. The theme of the film would now be a strong wake-up call to the realities of sea level rise due to global warming.

On July 23rd, at Wingspread, Dr. Day gave a presentation which included a computer simulation of the catastrophic effects of a Category 4 hurricane hitting New Orleans. It was prophetic. "This is a 3D image of New Orleans. Basically, the city is below sea level,

Venezia-New Orleans, Two Cities Linked By Vulnerability

A Film for Saving "la Serenissima"



Left, "acqua alta" (high water) in Venice's Piazza San Marco. Above, Dr. John Day analyzes a core sampling in the wetlands of New Orleans.

and it's sitting out in the middle of a natural wetlands system just like Venice is. And this is a simulation of what happens if a hurricane passes through the city. This is a Category 4 hurricane. You'll see the eye of the hurricane coming up, passing, and the whole city gets flooded. The loss of wetlands makes the city more vulnerable to these kinds of things because one mile of healthy wetlands can reduce hurricane storm surges by up to a foot and surface friction can reduce wind energy."

Katrina hit the Louisiana coast 37 days later. At that point, it was very clear to us that "Watermark" had to begin in a post-Katrina New Orleans and our main character should be a female biologist working in the wetlands of the Mississippi Delta, passionate about preventing future devastation from storms and floods by rebuilding the marshes. Then, she's sent to Venice on a similar crusade.

In November, 2005, to conduct additional script research, we took a trip to the wetlands of New Orleans with Dr. Day as our guide and experienced the marshes firsthand. Donning hip-boots and sinking waist-deep in mud provided a strong visual for our film's protagonist. Day's research methods, which consisted of core samplings, showed us how the marsh naturally sinks and therefore needs constant influx of sediment to keep it above rising water levels. He stressed that it's okay for a marsh to be flooded once in a while, but if it's flooded too often, the plants get stressed and die. The same situation is happening in Venice. Because of rising sea levels, the marshes of Venice and New Orleans are dying at an alarming rate. Disappearing with those marshes is the protection from storm surges and floods.

The solution? Dr. Day and other scientists propose opening surrounding waterways to

the wetlands. The goal is to take the fresh water flowing from nearby rivers, water that's full of sediment, and divert it so that those waters flow over the marshes and deposit those sediments. When the marshes get enough sediment, they can remain above sea level and therefore become sustainable. In Venice, rivers like the Piave or the Brenta need to be reconnected back to the lagoon. In New Orleans, more diversion structures need to be dug through levees of the Mississippi River to get its waters to flow and nourish the wetlands.

On August 29, 2005, Katrina was proof of the failure of the levees to protect New Orleans. But what about the MOSE? Are the MOSE dams good for Venice? Will the dams do the job of stopping the rising waters of the Adriatic and not destroy the environment? The "Watermark" script examines these questions.

There was a strong consensus among the scientists at Wingspread that very early on in the life of the MOSE dams, due to global warming exacerbating sea level rise, they'll be flooded too many times. Not only will there be problems of boat traffic, but if the natural cleansing action of the Adriatic tidal flows is restricted, the lagoon will become a cesspool. Furthermore, the storm surges from the Adriatic, also necessary to re-sediment the marshes, will be cut off. So, the gates don't seem to be a good long-term solution to marshland loss and Venice's flooding problem. In other words, the money could be spent more wisely towards a solution that can continue to be built upon for the future. Most importantly, because of new data of global warming sea level rise, the MOSE would likely lose its effectiveness early in its life span. At the Conference, there was agreement that the MOSE dams would merely be a short-lived stopgap.

Lastly, the most somber consensus brought to light at Wingspread was that Venice, at some point in the near future, will probably have to be leveed off—another New Orleans.

Did the levee failure in New Orleans destroy the city beyond repair? Dr. John Day insists, with the right planning and assuming New Orleans can secure the funds, the city can actually become a success story. "First, I'd restore the coastal wetlands because that's an important part of our flood protection of New Orleans. In fact, I would venture to say that we can't have an effective flood control levee system unless we have a restored coast. The second thing is, I wouldn't build anything below sea level again. I would build everything up above the maximum flood waters. Instead of this city being mostly individual houses, we should take a block of houses and make one apartment building and we make it nice enough, but we make it strong enough that it's going to survive hurricanes and it's above water level."

But what about Venice? Can Basilica San Marco be raised above the maximum flood level or will it eventually sit behind a wall of increasingly higher levees? Venice is a world treasure and her fate should be the subject of global debate. The "Watermark" film intends to ignite that controversy and bring her plight into the public's eye.

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