

The Shotgun Players' production of

**BULRUSHER**

**BY EISA DAVIS**

**OCTOBER 21, 2007**



**GOT YOUR APPLEHEAD? BAH! THING.**

The Shotgun Players have intrigued various members of Island-Life ever since 1992, when Patrick Dooley gathered another ten folks together to perform a series of serious plays in the basement of La Val's Pizza Parlor in Berkeley.

From these humble origins, which had the company presenting an eclectic mix of challenging plays by Beckett and Mamet, the company moved some productions to a splendid natural amphitheater in the Berkeley Hills where they continued a spirit of "guerilla theatre" in requesting no admission fees; all money was collected by passing the hat. The troupe acquired some renown for its skills as ensemble actors held together for more than another decade, garnering critical praise and a large devoted following in the process, eventually moving onto formal stages, such as the Julia Morgan Playhouse. A couple of years ago the ever-rising company obtained the playspace on Ashby and MLK right there at the Ashby BART station and their star was finally set in the skies as a permanent fixture.

As of 2007, the Company has won won several prestigious Dramalogue awards for direction, set design and production; the 1998 SF Weekly Black Box Awards for Best Company, Production and Acting; the 1999 SF Bay Guardian Award for Outstanding Theatre Company; and four 1999 Bay Area Critics Circle Awards for Entire Production, Original Script and Ensemble for local playwright Adam Bock's *Swimming in the Shallows* and Choreography/Fight Direction for *Romeo & Juliet*.

Preserving the spirit of "black box theatre", the company typically puts on very challenging work, even when it comes to Shakespeare, selecting "*Troilus and Cressida*" of the Bard's offerings for their last outdoor season.

They now regularly employ Equity actors in their increasingly proficient productions.

Sunday, our Island-Life Cultural Coordinator obtained coveted Tix for the Reviewers to hop onto a show during the "extended production" part of the Pulitzer-prize nominated play "Bulrusher." As we arrived some three hours before showtime, folks were begging to be put on the "wait" list at the box office.

So much for the Company. Now for the play, Bulrusher.



The Anderson Valley is loosely defined by the triangle of the towns of Albion, Boonville, and Point Arena in Mendocino County, shading down to Cloverdale and Gualala on the border with Sonoma County and the California coast. The region has consisted historically of towns defined by the logging

industry, fishing, and some specific outdoor sport activities, including abalone diving, snorkeling, and growing smallish patches of marijuana. Point Arena consisted of some three buildings, on the last visit, and a Park where scuba divers would lay out their gear. Albion possessed the high sum of four buildings and a population of some 41 count, leaving Boonville, with its beer distillery and B&B's the major burg in the area separated by the Coastal Range from the winery and tourism mess that starts with Clearlake and Kelseyville. The Russian River, heading due south at this place, also helps separate the area physically from the world-at-large.

Physically and geographically, the place is sparsely populated and densely wooded with coastal sequoias marching down in phalanxes to a sort of ridge that then descends quickly to beetling cliffs that drop yet again from Route 1 to the ocean. Thick fogs pour in all along the shore in the evening and creep with minor and major successes over this near ridge along the shore. No gold was found in this area, the Spanish found no reason to settle here, and the succeeding American conquest has left the area largely undisturbed for generations.

The people who live there live distinctly by choice, with disdain for wealth, and with large antipathy for government interference, or external interference of any kind. The cold and wet climate, coupled with isolation, has sort of re-created the same sort of Pomo culture that valued the local communal individual over the Outsider and which existed there for some 10,000 years before the Europeans wiped it all away.

From the substrate of this social loam, playwright Eisa Davis has crafted a play about identity, belonging, family, race, love, and insight.

In a survey of reviews, it seems clear the audiences are getting what the jaded reviewers are not. The *New York Times* termed the play a "coming of age story". The "*Chron*" said it started slow with static scenes, but "eventually got going." The *Oakland Trib* crowed about the hometown origins of the playwright, so of course its take read predictable.

The set, staging, text, and dramaturgy are enforced by the physical presence of the Navarro River, one of the many streams elevated by name to river status that flow some inches deep for several miles out of ridgetop springs to the ocean. In the wettest year, one can cross the Navarro dryshod by stepping on stones the some ten yards required at any point. It's banks are typically pebbles or mucky reeds. Lisa Clark has done a nice job of constructing a riverside mix of shore and tule and plank-wood dock for the production, with a sort of evocation of leafy overhang.

Set in 1955 amid the sequoias and tule-dotted streams that surround the real town of Boonville California, and written partly in the local dialect of "Boontling", a spicy language devised by residents so they could converse about things without outsiders understanding the gist, the play follows the arc of the title character as she comes of age amid the squabbles and celebrations of her small hometown. She is one of two Black residents, has fortune-telling powers, and is an outcast of sorts among outcasts because she is a foundling, discovered as a

baby in a basket by a town resident floating in the river and raised by the White schoolteacher (played with wonderful taciturn dignity by Terry Lamb).



Over the course of the next 190 minutes (one intermission), we observe and take part a bit, the workings of a small town where the main industry -- logging -- has shut up and moved on, leaving only odd jobs and Madam's strictly run and surprisingly moral bordello as the only main economic base. There is the town Fair, Fourth of July, and the annual Dance as social activities. Otherwise, in answer to Vera's question, "What do you do here for entertainment?", there is Bulrusher's laconic response, "We drink."

One rainy night Bulrusher gives a lift in her orange truck to a sopping Vera, a girl who has just traveled across the country to get away from the increasingly fractious Birmingham Alabama. Its 1955 and Vera shows Bulrusher a picture printed in Jet magazine of the murdered Emmett Till, astonished that in this place Bulrusher can walk into the town saloon's front door and be served a drink along with any White. The two form a bond and as Bulrusher learns about herself and who she is, they develop a wonderful love relationship in which the water of the lush Navarro is both backdrop and agent.



Howard Gerstein

Local productions here have taken to water on stage with great zest (perhaps influenced by Rep's Les Waters successful and elaborate use of pools and waterfalls), and here Lisa Clark has a waterfall along with the tule and lily-pad shores of the river. Actors splash and play and romp through the set, pour bowls of water over themselves in repeated evocations of baptisms and cleansings, squirt orange juice at one another and generally make a delightful mess. It can be said that fluids -- water, juice, blood and even the flows of sexual intercourse -- provide more than just a thematic motif, but also provide themselves as active agents. The moisture of sex, semen and vaginal flow, produce Bulrusher and one other significant pregnancy. Bulrusher reads the future by dipping her hands into water another has touched. Blood flowing from Boy's battered nose and mouth causes him to realize a few essential things the very callow youth (played with impish zest by newcomer Cole Smith) has repressed beneath plain self-concern. Near the end, the relationship between the two rivals in love is neatly and economically resolved when the one carefully walks up the steps to enter the kitchen of his former adversary to set down a hip flask. In response, the other sets out two glasses and the two end their conflict sharing a drink of whiskey with only a few words.

For a play with so much lyrical language packed in, there is a remarkable economy in the writing. The character of Schoolch says not a single word some five scenes into the play, communicating much with a single shrug. The first act closes with the graceful movement of a bird landing on a twig when the one



character turns to the other, saying simply, "I guess I can't hide anything from you." Silently, they kiss and lights fade out.

It is rare that a playwright can present such a balanced set of different characters. Usually a couple of the ensemble turn out to be "flat" in favor of developing the protagonist and antagonist. Here, however, the play is less about a single character coming to learn about herself as an entire community, and by extension, Society, coming to grips with what the playwright sees as social adolescence. In 1955, an entire important segment of American society was forced to enter stores by separate entrances, forced to use separate drinking fountains or go thirsty, and otherwise was kept apart from public enterprise and discourse. However, 1955 also saw the birth of the Civil Rights movement as well as a new kind of music the character of Logger calls "That electric stuff." and which Boy attempts on his acoustic guitar. The times they were a'changin'.

Music and song, by the way, play a significant part in this production, with Cole Smith ably strumming and singing and clapping his hands to help backdrop the action.

As for the times changing, Ms. Davis, a relative of SF State's firebrand professor Angela Davis, has a wiser Vera returning to Birmingham carrying the new hope in her belly, a baby conceived during a rape by a White policeman. Angrily, Bulrusher announces, "You want me to kill him? I can kill as many White people as you like." There is no looking away from ugly realities, in other words, however, Vera announces, "We will show them. We will take all the pain they can inflict and then open ourselves outward . . . and show the world . . . love."

Now that is something perhaps the hard-core thug rappers could pay heed to. Not self destruction, wasteful gang bangin' and community wrecking criminality with the absurd and nonsensical sop of a gift of basketballs after the murder of our boys (sorry I riddled your homeboy with bullets after trashing the place with drugs; here, have some basketballs.), but genuine reconciliation and determination for peace. The founder of the Crips would be alive today had he paid attention to that message.

Its interesting that Vera is the one who brings these kinds of realities to Bulrusher, who didn't even know she was Black until Logger told her at the age of five. And Vera is the one who finds a kind of reconciliation after being thrown violently out of the Birmingham department store by White "crackers" for wandering in through the front entrance.

"You mean you like living her among all these ofays?" Vera says, when she learns that there are only two Black people living in town.

But Boonville is not Birmingham and there is always a third force in every drama. As Logger says, "There's the Pomo living up the road on the Reservation. Those people are the Blacks around here."

And with astonishing power, Ms. Davis brings "those people" to the front quite effectively near the end as the terrible and wonderful revelations unfold and the bordello Madam (played by a frosty and iron-willed Louise Chegwidden) reveals herself to be quite a bit more than initially presented.

In short, Joe Bob gives the play two thumbs up and says, "Check it out." The play is much like California itself -- not without its problems, but in sum a

wonderful and well composed mixture possessed of lush beauty and running water.

**Cast**

Cole Smith - Boy  
D. Anthony Harper\* - Logger  
Jahmela Biggs - Vera  
Britney Frazier - Vera Understudy  
Kiryra Traber - Bulrusher  
Louise Chegwiddden\* - Madame  
Terry Lamb\* - Schoolch

\*Member of Actors' Equity

**Production Team**

Ellen Sebastian Chang Co-Director  
Margo Hall, Co-Director  
Patrick Dooley, Artistic Director  
Dave Maier, Fight Director  
Elizabeth Lisle, Production Manager  
Clark Suprynowicz, Composer/Music Director  
Jahana Azodi, Stage Manager  
Jarrod Fischer, Lighting Designer  
Lisa Clark Scenic Designer  
Mina Morita, Dramaturg  
Sarah Lowe, Props Master  
Valera Coble, Costume Designer  
Lili Smith & Kevin Keul, Lobby & Installation.  
Howard Gerstein, Photography