

Hugh Fox

Angela Consolo Mankiewicz

The whole house in West Hollywood, two blocks away from Hollywood-Hollywood, is one vast ranch-house library-museum: Balzac's complete works (MDCCCXCIX), the complete works of Du Maupassant (1909), Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Foucault's *Pendulum*, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, all of James T. Farrell, Lorca, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*...

On one wall is a poster-portrait of Verdi; a Die Walküre poster; a lithograph of Maria Callasa Beethoven collage (young Beethoven's portrait, older Beethoven's...then his skull); National Poetry Month posters, 1999, 2000, with photos of Elizabeth Bishop, Ginsberg, Blake, Yeats, Anne Sexton....the faces of the whole history of U.S. poetry staring out at you; stacks of *The Small Press Review* with my reviews in them; stacks of *Poets and Writers* magazine; and a computer next to my bed with stacks of printed-up E-Mail.

Angela herself—

"How old are you?"

"I'm not telling."

"My wife is fifty-eight."

"Well..."

I seem to have hit a bell. She's 100% Sicilian-Albanian, however old she is, still looking-great legs, a vampirish Siciliante face, and dark, penetrating, hypnotic eyes.

Her husband dominates the first evening of conversation. He's originally from New Jersey, a graduate in Philosophy of Seton Hall University, 77 now, goes to heart-therapy exercise twice a week after one heart attack twenty years back, plus two coronary bypasses and an aorta bypass.

He is commenting on our times, referring back to Marx, Freud, and Chomsky, characterizing our times as a sell-out to a capitalistic view of man/life as a commodity – the poorer the masses, the better for the capitalists. He has an immense vocabulary, as if all the books in the bookshelves had begun to talk.

She doesn't say much – smiles, laughs, agrees....

He talks about her as his supreme love-object/sex-object, and you can easily see her as the supreme seductress.

The next morning, she goes on her stationary bike; he's off for a long walk; I sit in the living room and just (Greek-Spanish-Portuguese-Sicilian) AM.

My second day in town, we go back to where I taught for ten years (1958-1968): Loyola-Marymount. When I was there, it was just Loyola University.

All of my old colleagues dead, a few pictures of them are framed on the wall outside of the English Department: Frank Sullivan, Frank Carothers, Theodore ("Ted") Erlandson....

Angela starts talking about her family, her problems with her mother and brother, and her first husband. When I ask her about the origins/stimuli of her own poetry she says, "I love Eliot, of course, but mainly I write about personal, inner, intimate things or political/social issues. And I write free verse, but I also like more traditional, rhymed forms, which gets me into all kinds of problems with editors. Traditionalist editors want trees, clouds...'nature'...and that's just not me. I'm human conflict. That's been the center of my whole life."

We go to the Loyola chapel, but the organ I used to play all of the time is locked. We walk all over the campus, and I get the name of the head of the drama department to whom I'd like to send some of my plans. I tell Angela how, back in 1968, when they inaugurated the Communication Arts Building, they put on my play, "The Outcast", starring my student Brian Avery (the blond guy who appears in the last few seconds of the film *The Graduate*), for the inauguration.

Then, I head back home to West Hollywood, down la Brea, La Cienega, Melrose...all of my old streets. Once in a while I recognize an old church or office building, but mainly all are either revised/rebuilt or spanking new. All of the food places, clothes places, traffic, and activity remind me of Westport in Kansas City. Am I back home or on another planet?

Angela's office, in the back of their English cottage-ish house, is filled with bookcases filled with whole files of *Poetry* (Chicago), *Poets and Writers*, *The Small Press and Small Magazine Review*, copies of the *Iliad*, Louise Gluck's *Proofs and Theories*, Adrienne Rich's *What I Found There*, *The Poet's Handbook*, *The Complete Rhyming Dictionary*, Fowler's *Modern*

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English Usage, CD's of things like *Awakening Osiris* (a translation of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *The Bhagavad-Gita*, and Walter Kaufman on Sophocles.

She's 100% inside of the total scene technically, aesthetically, and marketwise, in spite of not having an MFA, never getting involved with workshops, and having no academic ties.

Mankiewicz's first book, *Cancer Poems* (Undulating Bedsheets Productions in Los Angeles, 1995), is a combination of strongly metered (even one sonnet-variation) and straight-out say-it-as-it-is poetry that is reminiscent of the A.D. Winans-school. There's no attempt at being artsy-poetic. In fact, there's one page where all poetic pretensions are totally dropped, and it's pure prose/a prose poem:

A friend, the survivor, calls, reporting in; her mother is in ICU now, the tubes of surgery sprouting from her body; she needs blood, potential respiratory complications, renal complications, erratic blood pressure.....

("March 18: Guilt Sleep," no pagination.)

Compare this to one of the stanzaed poems, and what do you come up with?

We drive to the hospital, we wait, we talk
to the surgeon, anesthesiologist, head nurses.
We wait. The attendant teases us nurses as he shaves you,
helps you onto the gurney, starts dripping in valium.
I walk beside the gurney, rolling to OR, we hold hands,
laugh a little as you fade away, like we agreed,
following the surgeon's advice to give in, not fight it.

(Oct.11, 9:100 AM: We)

Refreshing, *n'est pas*? It's an amazing combination of traditional and ultra-modern styles. What we have is reportorial reality.... which is, at the same time, just as "poetic" in its own way, as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*:

Damn this place.

Bless this place.

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4 times in 10 years,
they saved his life.
North Tower -- South Tower--Plaza Tunnel --
5th Floor Bridge
The surgeons are superb
Main Lobby, Floor Lobbies, Coffee Shop, Gift Shop, Blood
Bank...
("Oct 12: Post-Surgery: Dialogues")

What I appreciate most about Mankiewicz's work is that it's totally no-nonsense, no fancy-wancy traditional poetization. It's like an old black-and-white *Film Noir* film where the main (only!) purpose is to get the viewer inside of the reality of what is going on.

Let's go on to the next book: *Wired*, published by Aquarius West Press in Venice, California in 2001.

This is dedicated to Richard, the "patient" in the *Cancer Poems*, with drawings by Richard Mankiewicz himself, and Wanda Blake.

There's a very different world here. There's still a no-nonsense approach, but much more inside of the world of contemporary poetics. You can feel the influence of *Poetry* and all of the other magazines and poetry volumes Mankiewicz has been surrounding herself with over the years.

It is here:
a tight room, brown and
lighter brown, Seurat
with a flat pencil point
plotting out squares and
ovals on a dresser top,
thick golden curlicues
clasping a ponderous mirror
of transparent dots, necessary
to fake white, to define
this room
("This is Not a Dream," p.5)

Rather surprising, isn't it, how reportorial turns into imagistic with the metaphorical switching back and forth between Nature (the

image) and Idea? It's not the morning news anymore, but Keatsian dynamics:

Too tired to forget,
She mourns, now,
like a great aging tree,
meager leaves whining
high in the wind,
a wizened twig trembling
at the sound, too frail
to do more
than hold on.
("She Mourns, Now," p.14)

And Wanda Blake's drawing of an old lady with upraised arms/hands helps reinforce the powerful comparison of an aging woman and an aging tree.

This is beautifully targeted.

Even what could be commonplace reflections on her husband's changing/aging could be said to be psychologising, but here it's transformed into major-stance poetry:

Someone's here with me, in this house, in your chair,
in our bed, but it isn't you. Anymore. It's you
dying. Common words uncommonly arranged
by a glass-eyed god who disengaged us
forever, ordered us to separate times,
to touch and not mean what we mean. Anymore.
Your space is tightening, swarming around you
into a smaller and smaller swirl, shutting me out.

("Not Yet Grief," p. 22, a poem
both in the Cancer Poems and
Wired.)

This is masterful again – a non-pareil description of the closing-in, self-centering caused by aging itself. But there's nothing prosaic about it

at all.

“What caused the difference between your pure prosaicness in *Cancer Poems* and the pure poeticness in *Wired?*,” I ask her, “Were you more steeped-in poetry-poetry between 1995 and 2001 than before?”

“No difference that I can see between them. I’ve been reading *Poetry* and all the rest of them since the very beginning.”

This is mystery # 1.

Mankiewicz’s latest book, *An Eye* (Pecan Grove Press, 2006) is yet another unexpected style-change. She’s a lot more “Beat” A.D. Winans-ish here. It’s the “real” world...and straight to the point. It’s studies in the nether-side of The Everyday.

Like the poem about her nasty mother, “First White Carnation Mother’s Day”:

....my mother died seething, denied her May-day delicacies
from me--fussy son and family, at least
in this case, be damned
I’d send a gift but not a card; I’d call, but not otherwise
budge, rabid backlash masquerading as principle. (p.12)

I like that, “rabid backlash masquerading/as principle.” There’s lots of feeling. There’s family, the city, even a bird in the driveway:

A city bird
L.A. not N.Y.
Cement with single family houses backyards, garages.
Melrose on one side, Hollywood Blvd. on the other
The bird is small, brown, pigeonlike. Beady-eyes of course.

It quivered in the driveway, feathers spiked like a punker
heaving its way up to the gate. It stalled.

A gun. Dammit I wish I had a gun. The poor thing is dying,
a breath at a time
for nothing.

SPCA. Sorry we don’t do birds
unless there’s a threat
to the public health.

God. Who?
(p.15)

I think she's going one hundred percent in the right direction, into, above all, communicability. There are no poetry class games, but poetry as pithy, pointed commentary on the real world. It's not poetry as academic tennis, but straight-from-the-heart rage.

At the same time, though, she never really abandons her larger historical visionariness, her irony, or her sophisticated literariness – like in her poem “The Lady Livia,” about the wife of Augustus Caesar who murdered or had murdered dozens of men and a few women and children who were trying to beat her son Tiberius out of the Roman emperors, with a beautifully manic ending:

Mater Patriae will have to summer and sweat until her much-abused grandson, now the Emperor Cladius, stammers out her divinity to the senate delivering her from damnation into eternal privilege, her likeness on sale in the marketplace, worshipped in temple, offered slaughtered sacrifice to secure the favor of bloodless Livia; Guardian of Family Life.
(p.11)

You can't help but wonder where she's going next, but you have to say this about her in all of her stylistic incarnations. Her touch is always attention-commanding masterfulness.

So I come back to Michigan, thinking I have the whole picture, and a package arrives of her fiction, including *Laura Hanson*, a novella being serialized in *ESC*.

A totally different Mankiewicz emerges here – very fluent fiction, at the same time very business-world-conscious, very much involved with the real world in real time. Of course, let's not forget her twenty years in corporate America, ending up as Manager of Applications Software for Xerox, no less. Here's a little sample. Mr. Big Boss is talking to Laura about money-matters:

“We can't be concerned with what some people say, now can we? But, of course, some employees are receiving larger checks

than others. I'm sure you expected that. After all, management has serious responsibilities and that demands considerable compensation. I'm sure you understand that."

He leaned forward, crossing his hands on his desk.

"But what does all that amount to? This is the furniture business. And like all business, its objective is to make a profit, not provide welfare programs for its employees. A retirement plan costs a company money, Laura; it's a benefit, not a right. Why, if businesses had to pay out pensions to all their employees, there wouldn't be any business at all. And then where would you be? Without a steady job and the opportunity to provide for yourself! Besides, you're obviously a responsible person; as you said yourself, you've been saving and planning your retirement for years. So why should you be expressing such resentment now? Yes, resentment, Laura. There's no reason for that. If you've miscalculated what you need to live on, you can get another job. After all, didn't you say that you have quite a few years to go before you'll be sixty five?"

(p.38)

What emerges here is an artist who can play it totally in terms of traditional poetic forms, but at the same time can totally leave the past behind and emerge into a triumphant now (very much aware of the socio-economic contexts of contemporary America).

Her NYC Siciliana-Americana worldview is very close to my Chicago Siciliana-Irish-Americana worldview. It's artistic, yes, and aware of traditional forms, but at the same time, her worldview's always just a little on the "outside" of American society itself, looking at it as if it were all classified, broken-down and museumized, a world not just to blindly live in, but to always observe very carefully.

Whatever might emerge from Mankiewicz's creativity...whatever....I wouldn't be surprised!

REUNION -- Who is this man,
who cries out about emptiness,

who cries out to a stranger,
visions and virtues apart,
who promises brotherly devotion with teenaged
bravado swallowed whole by the 6-year old
he's sure I must be.
Raised to rely on other, deprived
of who he is, he seeks himself. Not me.

He grew, straight and strong, in a vacuum,
feeding on delusion.
Now he stops under new-found rages
and walks with stillborn dreams.

He plows an accidental bond of blood
for the compassion he's sure
should be his,
asking nothing about who I've been,
all these years.

What does he want?
This man who asks me to walk with him again.

Again?

So long ago.
I'm grown up now,
with dead dreams of my own.

(First poem that Mankiewicz ever wrote,
published in the Lummo Review in 2001.)

Social Studies: "Marty"*

Remember "Marty"? The movie, the play?
Those lives you can't forgive for being middle
aged and ugly? For shouting "pity me,
I'm lonely"? Remember praising blackness,

the chance to rearrange your squirming knees?
Remember hands, the butcher's hands groping at
the spinster's beak to break the bond of meals
with Mother? The mother snipping, sniping: find
a girl, get married, bring me grandchildren.
Remember her sister? Wailing the curse of men
who once were sons? Beware the wife
who undermines the boy's most sacred ties.

Mother shrugs Not My Marty -- Not martyr's
Girl, then pokes the spinster's heart and finds
propriety, a will heavier than need, a back room
without a view. Closeup now of panic: eyes wide,
swallowed gasp. Next scene: Mother pitching Marty:
love bit scratching skin for traces of blood. Too
late. Marty's bribed the spinster's soul and his,
trading paper towels stuffed inside his collar
for linen on his lap and someone else's face
across the dinner table. She'll take him
and his unkempt words that blurt too loud and blunt
the sound of public dances pulsing in her veins,
in a corner, unseen, unmasked. Last chance, only
chance. Sealed with a kiss that makes you wince
and turn away, a touch that makes you shudder
while the credits roll. Too soon.

A mother mourns at the edge of a frame flashing
the groom, his missing tooth, his boney bride
in white; one more unlikely union sanctified
by God'sunseemly smile. House lights help but
can't stop phantom reels peeling off in your head:
the play of silk pajamas wedding night,
dinner conversation one year later, two,
ten, ever after.

*By Paddy Chayevsky

(Published in POETPOURRI (Comstock Review),
vol.1v, #1, 1990, rev.)

PATCH OF TIME

Late on Sunday when the sun is blinking
its laziest light on a yawning flower
a patch of time comes to visit, winking,
settling down on a sill to pass an hour,
Shy shadows freshen matted minds and cool
ambitious fires of midday missions;
they signal the dawdling nightlights to crawl
up moonlit thrones, like ancient magicians.

They belong to no one, no thing, no need
except to think or not to think, forget,
remember; whisper to your soul and feed
the idleness that conjures no regret.

This precious patch of time that heeds no clock,
that reinvents the self next week will mock.

(SPSM&h , AMELIA, 1992)

RE-IMAGINING A LEGEND*

Though not a child, I lay in your arms
while you rocked us slowly, evenly.

Though not a child, I became small enough
to curl my body into yours, feel your warmth,
your heartbeat; hear you humming.

Your long auburn hair is not loose this time,
but braided, circling your head; your eyes
are clear and serene, looking beyond me
to some distant space.

Your benign smile secures me and my chin sinks
into my chest; I may sleep now, to dream
the childish dreams I believe in.

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So, when you run the dagger through my heart,
quickly, to minimize pain, it is OK with me;
when you cover my mouth with yours to consume
my breath, I release it to you willingly.

You wrap my body in white linen and look at me,
kiss my face, my neck; you hold me close to your breast.

You carry me into the desert, your long, yellow dress
rippling in the wind; I am becoming full-grown again
but you are strong and lift me over your shoulder.

You are silent, all I can hear is your heartbeat;
you have no tears, only my blood running down
your legs to lick your bare feet.

* Provoked by the Pier Paolo Pasolini 1970's film Medea, starring (a non-singing) Maria Callas. (Published in Pyramid Magazine in 2006).