

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Directing Herbert White
By James Franco
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Review by Dennis Daly

Even unrequited love arouses only glassy-eyed tedium in *Directing Herbert White*, a collection of limp, low-rent gossipy sketches by James Franco. Other pedestrian insights, masquerading as poetic revelation and scattered throughout this oh-so-precious Hollywood pseudo-production, fall embarrassingly flat and beg the question: why would renowned Graywolf Press publish these sophomoric jottings?

The opening poem entitled *Because* chronicles an actor's loss of self in his romanticized character. Nothing original here. No verbal music. No imagery worth a second look. Franco opens his Heath Ledgeresque poem thusly,

*Because I played a knight,
And was on a screen,
Because I made a million dollars,
Because I was handsome,
Because I had a nice car,
A bunch of girls seemed to like me*

*But I never met those girls,
I only heard about them.
The only people I saw were the ones who hated me,
And there were so many of those people...*

Hand in Glove, the third poem in a series called *The Best of Smiths*, Side B devolves into uncomfortable cliché almost immediately and it only gets worse. Unrequited love should quake under you; it should wrench the neck of merciless time. Not this poem. Consider these lines if you dare,

*...I see you drive in your Mustang—
Arched behind the wheel,
Ray Bans
Blond—
It's sexy Satan.*

*Graduation day,
I'll be gone
And you,
You never knew me.*

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*I'll keep a room
For you
In my mind.
There is a table, a chair
And a candle
That burns forever.*

Using the poem *Chateau Dreams* as a rather uninspiring vehicle to choreograph the seediness and diseased dreams of Hollywood, Franco drops a number of names, who stayed at this veritable hotel hell, to try to enliven his dead-on-arrival lines. He includes Natalie Wood (at 15 she was raped there), John Belushi (he died ingesting a speedball there), Lindsay Lohan (making a nuisance of herself) and of course himself (reading Jacobean plays). How wonderful it must have been for him! The poem ends this way,

*In Bungalow 89
There was the sailor on the wall,
Glass eyed and pale.*

*The room was on the second level,
The exterior walls hugged by vines.*

Every night Lindsay looked for me and I hid.

Out the window was Hollywood.

One of Franco's poems, *Acting Tips*, belies its own title. In fact the purpose of the poem seems to be a listing of Franco's acting credits, which the publisher already enumerates in the author's overly credentialed biography (He has five MFAs. Is that some sort of record?) at the back of the book. Here's a bit of the poem with one such credit,

*Then I played Scott Smith,
Harvey Milk's lover.
I'm still surprised
By the response
To that character.
The secret there:
Minimalism.*

*The film is called Milk,
Not Smith,
And that's how I played it:
A supporting lover,
Thus, as a supporting actor
To support Sean
Whom I love so much.*

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Over half way through the collection a strange little admission entitled Fake appears and exhibits not a little self-awareness. In this poem the persona disses his voice or voices relating these poems. I guess that means the poet's persona negates his own persona's legitimacy. The poet confesses,

*...he's the one that writes
These poems.
He has attitude and swagger*

*That I don't have.
But on the page, this fake me
Is the me that speaks.
And this fake me is louder*

*Than the real me, and he
Is the one that everyone knows...*

In the piece Sal Mineo Franco details the pointless death of the actor Mineo in an equally pointless poem. The first two lines that follow, apparently meant as irony, I found particularly repulsive. The poet explains,

*Stabbed near his heart,
In the heart of Hollywood.*

*For a year they didn't capture his killer.
So the tabloids said he was killed for drugs,
Or because he was gay:
A GAY LOVE TRIANGLE KILLING.
But it was none of those things,
None of those things.*

Franco here rightly rails against tabloid journalism. The problem is that Franco's book reeks of tabloid poetics—to put it nicely. Supermarkets have better material available for the queued up frustrated patrons of which I'm often one.

Directing Herbert White, this collection's title piece astonishes with its irrelevancy to anything poetic, at least in this collection of supposed poems. Put simply, it is not and never will be a poem. The piece does, however, prosaically elucidate another poet (namely, Frank Bidart) and his inspiration for Herbert White, a poem that Franco made into a movie. Franco also chronicles Bidart's background and Bidart's hesitancy to read this poem on necrophilia in public. Fair enough, and perhaps interesting, if one doesn't know much about Frank Bidart, a Bollingen Prize winner. The piece also discusses in a little detail how Franco adapted Bidart's poem to film. And that's it: a non-poem about an adaptation of a controversial poem. Here are two of his snippets unabashedly admiring Bidart,

His first book, golden State, was published by Richard Howard. None of the poems had been published in magazines.

and,

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Golden State, what a fucking title. Frank is the loving son of Lowell and the rebel son of Ginsberg. He is the recondite and the hip.

The local Barnes and Noble, where I purchased Franco's collection, stocks in the contemporary poetry section Billy Collins, Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, and all the recent publications of Graywolf Press and not much more. I'm beginning to wonder about Graywolf Press—and that's too bad.