

Adaptation of *Mao II* by DeLillo to be Produced in April

Jody McAuliffe became intrigued with the notion of “artist as criminal” after seeing *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, a 1976 John Cassavettes film. “In order to keep his art,” says McAuliffe, “the protagonist has to commit murder.”

She explores this idea in her Theater Studies course, “The Criminality of Art,” which she co-teaches with Frank Lentricchia of Duke’s Literature program. The course examines the artistic process itself as an act of violation, along with the artist as criminal or would-be criminal/terrorist.

In the course, students study Cassevettes’ film in addition to plays by Mamet, Genet, and Synge, novels by Conrad, Dostoevsky, and DeLillo, and other works collected from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “In examining the artist as a force of change, we even look at the Unibomber Manifesto,” says McAuliffe. “In order to be published we’ve had to kill people,” Kaczynski tells us.”

Now McAuliffe is not only teaching about the artist as terrorist, she is bringing this research to the theater in her adaptation of Don DeLillo’s 1991 novel, *Mao II*, which directly addresses the convergence of artist and terrorist. *Mao II* is the story of Bill Gray, a J.D. Salinger-like novelist in a world where acts of terrorism have replaced the novel in their capacity to reshape consciousness. Incapable of finishing his long-awaited masterpiece, Gray agrees to have his photograph taken and emerges from a lifetime of hiding. In order to jumpstart his moribund existence, he undertakes a dangerous journey, involving a hostage held by Maoist terrorists in Beirut. Though serious in its subject matter, the story is infused with DeLillo’s trademark wit and humor.

Mao II will be produced by Theater Previews at Duke, in collaboration with Duke Players, April 17-21, 2002 in Sheaffer Theater in the Bryan Center.

“News of political terror was beginning to move into a narrative that used to be the stronghold of the

novelist,” said internationally acclaimed novelist and playwright DeLillo in a 1991 interview published in the *New York Times Book Review*. “Today, the men who shape and influence human consciousness are the terrorists.”

In a CNN world filled with endless repetition, symbolized by the multiple images of Mao Zedong in Andy Warhol’s screenprint series, individuality is absorbed and people become deadened to anything but the most violent and sensational acts. “In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential,” said DeLillo in a 1991 *New York Times Magazine* interview, “but in a society that’s filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act... True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to.”

Production Includes Duke, UNC Faculty

This developmental production will mark the culmination of a two-year investigation involving Duke and UNC faculty. “One of the most thrilling parts of the whole project is the team I’ve been able to put together. It has been a tremendously fruitful and highly stimulating collaboration,” says McAuliffe.

Frederick Neumann of Mabou Mines, a New York-based avant-garde theater company renowned for its interpretations of works by Samuel Beckett, will play Bill Gray. Honora Fergusson, also of Mabou Mines, will play Bill Gray’s editor. Clay Taliaferro and Chris Morris, both Duke faculty, will also appear. McAuliffe will co-direct with Derek Goldman, professor in Performance Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill and artistic director of Street Signs for Literature and Performance.

Frank Lentricchia is the dramaturg for the production. Besides being a professor of literature and a novelist, Lentricchia is a prominent critic who has written extensively about DeLillo and is editor of a collection

about the author’s work called *Introducing Don DeLillo*. DeLillo’s writing, says Lentricchia, “represents a rare achievement in American literature – the perfect weave of novelistic imagination and cultural criticism.”

The project, centering as it does on the role of media and technology in the destruction of the individual, will feature digital video designed by William Noland, professor of Art and Art History at Duke and a soundscape by Scott Lindroth, professor in Duke’s Department of Music. Jan Chambers of Theater Studies will design sets and costumes. Miriam Cooke, professor of Asian and African Languages and Literatures, is a co-investigator along with Rob Sikorski, Executive Director of the Center for International Studies.

In 1999 DeLillo became the first American recipient of the Jerusalem Prize, awarded to writers “whose work expresses the theme of freedom of the individual in society.” He also received the National Book Award for *White Noise* (1985) and the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Mao II*. DeLillo is expected to visit Duke during the play’s run for a public conversation with Lentricchia.

Generous supporters of *Mao II* include the Provost’s Common Fund for interdisciplinary arts and humanities, headed by Vice-Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies Cathy Davidson; Duke University’s Office of the President and the Office of the Dean, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences; Duke’s Institute of the Arts; the Department of English; Duke’s Arts and Sciences Research Council; and the Andy Warhol Estate.

“This production of *Mao II* represents the best in collaboration of artists and scholars and the best in interdisciplinary studies, both between universities, with Jody and our UNC colleague Derek Goldman co-directing, and between multiple departments at Duke,” says Richard Riddell, chairman of the department of Theater Studies.

-Miriam Sauls.

A profile of Jody McAuliffe appears on page 6 of this issue.

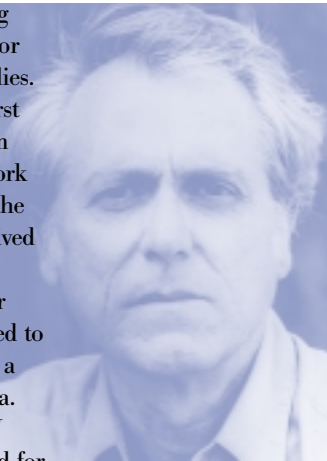


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