

March 24-30, 2010

**THEATER**

# TWO MOONS, LOTS A BEER

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI | JAY SCHEIB ADAPTS SAMUEL R. DELANY'S EPIC SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSIC *DHALGREN*



Naomi White

In Bellona, a city somewhere in the Midwest, a disaster has occurred. The few citizens remaining negotiate an urban space in which scientific rationalism and civilized conduct no longer apply. A red sun haunts the sky by day; two moons hover

in the night. Buildings burn but are not consumed. The geography of streets alters. Time twists. Disorder reigns. And director Jay Scheib has the privilege of translating all this chaos onto the stage. "It's horrifying," he says. "Really hard to do. It's just so huge."

On April 1 at the Kitchen, Scheib will debut *Bellona: Destroyer of Cities*, described as "part dance, part live cinema, part theater, part urban simulation for disappearing cities." He has derived the piece from *Dhalgren*, Samuel R. Delany's sprawling, cyberpunk

meditation on sexuality, race, and catastrophe. While some sci-fi luminaries (Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison among them) have termed the 1975 book unreadable, it has sold more than a million copies and attained the status of a genre classic.

After a day of rehearsal at the Performing Garage, Scheib reflects on what drew him to *Dhalgren*. Though its nearly 900 nonlinear pages do not readily suggest theatrical adaptation, he wanted to make a play of the novel even before he'd read half of it. He found himself attracted to the imagery of a damaged city and the troubling timeliness of Delany's concerns. "We're trying to tackle a piece that looks very unapologetically at race and gender in America in the '70s," says Scheib, "but it reads like it was written this morning. We're grappling with that."

Happily, Delany, who attended an early workshop of *Bellona*, approves of Scheib's adaptation. "It's quite wonderful to have your work interpreted by artists of such energy and vision—not to mention such theatrical intelligence," he wrote the *Voice* in an e-mail. Despite this authorial endorsement, Scheib and his cast (most of whom have read *Dhalgren* at least twice) have plenty to wrestle with. They need to animate an abstruse and disjunctive text, which includes several troubling passages that verge on the pornographic. During rehearsal, they had practiced a sequence involving group sex and scandalous language. Shirts were doffed, belts were loosened, a mattress's springs were strained, and Scheib was moved to answer questions such as, "Do I do that before or after I say, 'Smell my dick?'"

*Bellona* marks Scheib's second attempt to stage sci-fi. It follows *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)* in a venture he's named "Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems." Drawing on his fascination with technology and the resources that an associate professorship in directing at MIT permits him, the project weds theater and science. *Untitled Mars* employed research into aerospace and astronautics; *Bellona* will refer to civil engineering and urban planning. Though he has not yet discovered how to integrate those disciplines into this production, Scheib hopes they will provide insight into how Bellona functions. "It has been more or less forgotten and abandoned by the world outside it," he explains, "but nonetheless, it is an ongoing system. No one knows where the food comes from, why there's always beer. It's like a strange social experiment."

The showing at the Kitchen may simply mark the first iteration of this "strange, social experiment." Scheib has fantasies of producing the play in a specific site over the course of several days. "The way to do this project is to actually do it in a neighborhood," he muses. "The audience would have to travel around and live more or less by the rules or lack thereof." His desire to achieve a more naturalistic setting for the piece speaks to the competing impulses that animate his work—science fiction on the one hand, theatrical realities on the other. As to how the two will align in this project, Scheib admits, "I'm very, very scared."

'BELLONA: DESTROYER OF CITIES'  
APRIL 1-10, THE KITCHEN, 512 WEST  
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