

Book Review: 'Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints: Essays'

by Arthur Salm

"Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints: Essays" by Joan Acocella; Pantheon; 524 pages; \$30.

I pretty much read these 30 essays over the course of 30 evenings, and by the end of the first week it had become like returning time and again to a drop-dead thriller at about the second-to-last chapter. You know the feeling, or at least I hope you do: The sharp little leap of the heart as you collapse onto the bed against the sit-up pillow, then open the book, shift the bookmark, negotiate positions with the cat - and disappear. (Details may vary according to user.)

Most of these essays first appeared in *The New Yorker*, many are about dance and all are electrifying for more or less the same reasons: Acocella engages the task, the trials, the very aesthetic of the artist, and does so in pure, clean, deceptively simple and elegantly straightforward prose in the service of an attitude so devoid of pretension and condescension that the effect is startling.

ARTIST ESSAYS - Joan Acocella's 'Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints: Essays' first appeared in *The New Yorker*. Many are about dance and all are electrifying. CNS Photo. And, every bit as important, inviting: Acocella is not writing (just) for devotees of dance. I doubt that there are a dozen descriptions of physical movement, yet the dance essays - mostly mini-bios of the likes of Vaslav Nijinsky, Mikhail Baryshnikov, George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp, Bob Fosse, etc. - feel all but kinetic. While only nine of the 30 pieces concern dance, they dominate this collection, forming its physical center - they're essays 11-19 - and intellectual nuclear core.

One needn't read the essays in order. Feeling at the outset intimidated by the dance section - I had yet to cast myself into the smooth, steady current of Acocella's reassuring style - I sought out her essays on writers (there are more of them than there are of dancers, actually): H.L. Mencken, Dorothy Parker, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Frank O'Hara (which confused me at first, as I was thinking John O'Hara, and kept muttering, "What the hell is she talking about?").

Her review of Terry Teachout's Mencken biography is itself a crisp, withering thumbnail Life of Mencken. She nails him as an anti-Semite (he lived his entire life embracing a kind of gleeful moral aphasia) and

philistine (a key insight), then nails Teachout for missing Mencken's essence: "His diction was something fantastic, a combination of American slang and a high, Latinate vocabulary ...

"In a way, Mencken did for American journalism what Mark Twain did for American fiction - gave it a native language, not pseudo-European but homegrown."

Acocella uses "True Confessions," on the great and largely unsung Italo Svevo, to illustrate, through the progression in Svevo's work, the great seismic shift from realism to modernism. Typically, she's incisive, deft, unerringly accessible and never didactic. I even managed, somewhat triumphantly, to come up with a point of disagreement: I prefer Beryl deZoete's 1930 translation of Svevo's "Confession of Zeno" to William Weaver's more accurate, but to my mind less inspired, 2001 effort "Zeno's Conscience." (See?)

Discovery, of course, is even more rewarding than newly received insight on old favorites. It's said (in school, at least) that there's no such thing as a dumb question, so here's hoping there's no harm in confessing ignorance: I had never heard of Marguerite Yourcenar until Acocella introduced us in "Becoming the Emperor." A French novelist who spent a good part of her life in the United States, Yourcenar is the author of "Memoirs of Hadrian" (1951) one of the very best books I'd never heard of - taking Acocella's word for it. As you can't help doing:

"What made her remarkable ... was not so much her style as the quality of her mind. Loftiness served her well as an artist: she was able to dispense love and justice, heat and cold in equal parts. Above all, her high sense of herself gave her the strength to take on a great topic: time. Time was an obsession with her immediate predecessors in European fiction, but whereas those novelists showed us modern people altered - made thoughtful, made tragic - by time's erasures, she erased the erasures, took us back to Rome in the second century ... Yourcenar regarded the average historical novel as 'merely a more or less successful costume ball.' Truly to recapture an earlier time, she said, 'required years of research, together with a mystical act of identification.' She performed both, and wrought a kind of historical miracle."

The heart of Acocella's work turns out to be a variation on Thomas Edison's old theme of "5 percent inspiration, 95 percent perspiration." Making art is hard, she reminds us; talent is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for success. Not that the tortuous paths of artists are not unique. From "The Soloist," her affecting essay on Baryshnikov:

"In the case of the child artist, and particularly one who has suffered a terrible loss, it is tempting to read artistic decisions as psychological decisions, because we assume that a child cannot really be an artist. But, as many people have said, children are probably more artistic than adults, bolder in imagination, more unashamedly fascinated with shape, line, detail. In Baryshnikov's case, the mother's devotion and then the loss of her can help to explain one thing; the work he put into the ballet. For the rest - the physical gift, the fusion of steps with fantasy, the interest in making something true and complete ... all of which are as much a part of him today as they were when he was twelve - we must look to him alone."

And, concluding her sketch of the artist in exile, visiting the place of his birth: "Baryshnikov took his curtain calls with the members of the Latvian National Opera Ballet, they in their dirndls and harem pants, he in his Isaac Mizrahi jerseys - messengers of the two worlds created when Europe split in half. It will never wholly mend, any more than Baryshnikov, child of that break, was ever able to find an artistic home. But it is hard to regret his fate. Homelessness turned him inward, gave him to himself. Then the dance, the substitute home, turned him outward, gave him to us."

There's more - a diverting review of a book on nonverbal communication in 19th century Naples ("The Neapolitan Finger"); an odd dish on the torrid affair between Simone de Beauvoir and Nelson Algren ("The Frog and the Crocodile" - who knew? And which in Acocella's telling makes impossible to say, Who cares?); intriguing essays dissecting evolving perceptions of the two saints of the title, Mary Magdalene ("The Saintly Sinner") and Joan of Arc ("Burned Again"); possible collateral artistic damage suffered by Lucia Joyce, James Joyce's troubled daughter ("A Fire in the Brain").

Collectively, these essays deliver a sustained, breathtaking aesthetic wallop. Acocella not only makes the fine arts, and the finer points of the fine arts, accessible, she makes them necessary, vital - intrinsic, in the end touching my own, personal aesthetic sensibility so profoundly that, though I know "Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints" is very, very good I find it impossible to determine how good, in a literary, point-assigning, more-but-how-much-more-than-"thumbs-up"? kind of way.

Which is an evasion Acocella herself would not tolerate. In her sad piece about the sad Dorothy Parker, she chastises the writer for the superficiality of her New Yorker book reviews (signed as Constant Reader) of the late 1920s and early 1930s, pointing out that, come time to analyze in any depth, Parker would "unload some hysterical hyperbole (Hemingway she compared to the Grand Canyon; Gide she compared to the Grand Canyon and the Atlantic Ocean) and then beat a hasty retreat."

Here I have to take issue, in part because most of the Constant Reader pieces were hardly book reviews at all, but exercises in delightful Parker Snark, which is why Parker's trashing works (on "The House at Pooh Corner": "Tonstant Weader fwowed up") and her praise doesn't.

And in part because I'm going to unload some hysterical hyperbole and then beat a hasty retreat myself:

Twenty-nine artists and two saints.

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