

THE PARROTT

Book Reviews and More from the Portsmouth Public Library





Women stalk abandoned factories, pose before a studio background, gaze serene or defiant, or emerge from nature as if they've grown there, skin and fabric and all, come from the sand or the sea or the tree. Couples embrace among gravestones, or dangling vines, or spent candles, weapons, flames - props evoking a darkness present in all of Michael Winters' photographs. There is shadow here, and incongruity - a ball gown amid the rubble, a sweet smile from a disheveled figure, or historic costumes made post-apocalyptic or surreal. And there is humor - in startling contrasts, in environs transformed, and on the faces of models in whom photographer Michael Winters clearly brings out the best. As Tana Sirois, featured on our cover, attests, "he just keeps getting better and better!"

In conversation, Winters is humbler than you'd expect. A counselor at Portsmouth High School by day, he'd prefer to think of his photography work a hobby. "I'm not out looking for galleries... I started relatively recently, compared to some people who've been doing it for twenty to thirty years."

Indeed, his hobby is less than ten years old.

Cover Artist Interview

Darkness & Beauty: Michael Winters

Laura Horwood-Benton

It began with an Olympus point-and-shoot in 2008. When Winters realized what he couldn't do with that camera, he got another one. And then another. And then he realized what he couldn't do with lights, "and it's snowballed from there." Perhaps because the hobby has grown so organically, he's slow to acknowledge his talent. Despite having held exhibits, and working on a book of his photography for release on November 7, he is insistent: "I don't even know if I consider it art."

The relaxed attitude with which he treats his work is belied by its quality. In a short time, Winters' photography has become an essential part of the Seacoast's arts & culture scene, featured on album covers, theater posters, and publicity for the Prescott Park Arts Festival.

In spite of his humility, Winters does project an attitude of deep satisfaction. He rejoices in finally having found a creative outlet that fulfills him, as well as a lifestyle that supports it. "I get up at six, I go to school, I'm there until three, and then I come home and have the rest of the day. So this is what I do, instead of watching television. If I don't shoot for a week," he muses, "I feel a little crazy."

"It's the first time in my life I've felt like that. It took me a long time to find something that I enjoy this much, and in some ways I'm making up for lost time, because I started late."

As a counselor, Winters bears witness to the reality that "a lot of things have to

converge" to make it possible for people to realize their potential, in art and other realms of life. Circumstances can trap you or sustain you, and he's continually thankful for his.

Gratitude isn't the only way his career has informed his work as a photographer. "You have to be able to make people feel comfortable in photography... and that's sort of part and parcel of being a counselor." Counseling requires an awareness of boundaries, a skill that Winters found essential when he began photographing female models. It's important to be sure that "no one leaves the shoot feeling uncomfortable."

It's an underrated but essential skill as a



photographer - the ability to put your subjects at ease - and it has made all of his partnerships possible. In this issue of *The Parrott* you will also find interviews with hair stylist Chelsey Drapeau and model Tana Sirois, both artists themselves and deserving of equal recognition for our cover

image. Unlike the fashion photography in which he often finds inspiration, a photo shoot with Michael Winters is collaborative and open. An idea for a shoot is as likely to come from any of its participants, and in his portfolio he's deliberate about sharing credit.

These relationships developed naturally, says Winters. "It's a shared interest between us... in doing something a little different. Some of his collaborators go to New York Fashion Week each year, bringing back ideas and inspiration. "They like to do some weird stuff, and so do I."

Weird though his stuff may be, it is very clearly influenced by tradition. Winters cites the Golden Age of cinema as a lifelong source of inspiration. Marlena Dietrich in *The Scarlet Empress* [1934] "pretty much encapsulates just about everything that I like... I just, visually remember it. Dietrich is just beautiful, with a glowing face. There this interplay between darkness and beauty that appeals to me." Other reference points include *Double Indemnity* [1944], featuring Barbara Stanwyck, and the work of cinematographer John Alton and director Douglas Sirk, whose films are "all shot in this crazy beautiful technicolor.... They're basically melodramas, but they're so vivid and beautiful, and it sort of belies all the nasty stuff that's happening in the movie. It's this weird juxtaposition."

Later, he became more interested in fashion photography, particularly "Huge setpieces that probably take months to build... I wish I had the time! You need space, money and people to commit their time. It would be wonderful if I were a millionaire."

On considering these, Winters remarks that he used to think of himself as "a consumer, not a producer. But that's changed..."

That interplay between darkness and beauty is something Winters draws out of his models, and of the landscape of New England, too. Abandoned buildings and rocky shores and forest clearings are as

evocative as a sullen or serene or haunted face.

Perhaps the power of his subjects' interaction with their environment stems from Winters' own ambivalence about the concept of place, of home. As an adopted child in the Midwest, he felt "this separateness... you don't know your history at all. Home is kind of a weird idea for me."

Though he got along well with his adoptive parents, he never really felt like he fit in. In 1988, Winters left for the Seacoast, working as a counselor at a residential school in Dover. In 1992, he helped to open beloved coffeehouse and punk music venue The Elvis Room in Portsmouth, and went on to work in several local businesses until he was offered a job at Portsmouth Middle School, eventually moving up to the high school.

After thirty years, this is the only place he'd actually call home, and it's changed significantly during his tenure. In particular, Winters laments the growing economic divide. "I don't think people realize that there are a lot of families in this town who struggle financially. There are kids who don't have enough to eat... and you wouldn't know it walking here."

But darkness walks beside beauty here, too, and Winters admits, "I live in a beautiful place." And he continues to be captivated by contrasts, by flux. If he could travel anywhere, it would be St. Petersburg. "They've gone through so many iterations in Russia, politically and socially. Something fascinates me about it."

He gravitates toward Russian literature for the same reason, enjoying Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Before that there were mysteries, like Hardy Boys, and nature books. "My dad was a science teacher, so we'd always get books from the library." Though he's not a big reader now, like

many of us Winters remembers "the smell of my elementary school library still. It's a good smell, almost comforting... I always smell books when I buy them."

Winters' own book will be released on November 7 by Plainspoke Design.



Reading/Watching List

All titles available at the Portsmouth Public Library.

The Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn

The Tower Treasure: Hardy Boys 1 by Franklin W. Dixon

Vogue Book of Fashion Photography: The First Sixty Years by Polly Devlin

Magnificent Obsession: Criterion Collection directed by Douglas Sirk

An American in Paris directed by Vincente Minnelli, cinematography by John Alton

Double Indemnity directed by Billy Wilder, starring Barbara Stanwyck

The Scarlet Empress: Criterion Collection directed by Josef von Sternberg, starring Marlena Dietrich

...you can find Michael Winters online at michaelwintersphotography.com



Interview

Actor/Director/Cover Model Tana Sirois

Laura Horwood-Benton

The cover model for this issue of *The Parrott* is Tana Sirois, actor, director and Portsmouth native. She attended the Liverpool Institute For Performing Arts in England, and currently lives in New York City. We quizzed her about her homes, lives and careers...

What are the top 5 things you miss most about Portsmouth?

1. My Mum, my Dad, my amazing Nana, and my step-mom, Sue.
2. My fantastic childhood friends/mentors
3. The smell of the ocean
4. Affordable theatre rental space
5. The fabulous Prescott Park Concerts you can hear across town.

What do you miss about Liverpool, UK?

- Extremely cheap flights to beautiful European cities
- The NHS!!
- The unique Liverpoolian fashion sense that encourages locals to go on a "night out" dressed as a sexy glitter chicken or take a trip to Tesco in their pajamas.

What's better in New York?

I was consistently battling visa laws while living in the UK, so there is something great about being able to put down some theatrical roots in a city where I can live long-term. I'm also living on an Urban Farm right now, so I can eat fresh eggs from our chickens in the backyard and have an endless supply of veggies - definitely not what I expected when I moved to NYC. It's wonderful!

How did you first come to theatre? When, and how, did you know you hoped to pursue it as a career?

I did my first play in 1994 at Seacoast Rep. I knew I wanted a career in theatre-making when I started working with Tim Robinson, Kristan Curtis and Todd Hunter at The Player's Ring in 2002.

What do you look for in a creative partner/collaborator?

I look for people who are passionate about the same type of work I am, but who challenge me to work in a new and different way. Above all, I look for creative partners who find joy in the process and want to have fun.

How do you find working as a photographic model different than acting, or directing? Does your work in theatre make you a better, or worse, model?

Well, I really only model for Michael Winters! I love working with Michael, because he never makes me feel like it's my "job" to be attractive. In fact, I instead feel it is my job to be as weird and experimental as possible so he has a wide range of shots to choose from.

What's the difference between working with a director and a photographer?

Working with a director usually involves a lot of table work, discussions about motivation, and drilling moments in the play until we uncover something new. When I'm working with Michael we just jump in and see what happens.

What's a role you've always wanted to play?

Sal in *The Match Box* by Frank McGuinness

What are you working on right now?

I'm just about to play Adele in "Adele In Berlin" in the Strawberry One-Act Festival at the Tato Laviera Theatre. I'm also associate producing an original play called "Coping" for FringeNYC. Next month I will start devising a two-person science fiction play with Dirt [contained] Theatre Company, which I co-founded in 2010.

Where do you hope to be in 5 years?

I want to continue making new and exciting theatre, and get to a point where I can sell out shows and pay the actors and creative team what they are worth. I would love to blend my love of travel with my passion for the arts and do some more acting outside of America. I have so many ideas for plays floating around- I would love to get a solid draft of a play finished and produced.

What has been the biggest challenge for you as a woman in the theatre business?

I think the most challenging thing about being a female actor is the lack of strong, multilayered female roles - one of the many reasons why new work is so important.

[In the photoshoot featured on our cover] were the wires uncomfortable? Were you thinking of the tangle of wires as a metaphor for our obsession with technology?

It had been a few years since I last worked with Michael, and he just keeps getting better and better! I was playing an extremely advanced robot in a new science fiction play when we shot "Wired," so I was thinking a lot about artificial intelligence versus the human mind, and how frustrating and scary it would be to have a mind that fell somewhere in the middle.

Did you visit the library as a child? What was your favorite thing to do there?

I spent so much time in the library as a child that the librarians would set aside the books they knew I would like - usually with an animal as the protagonist and great illustrations.

What book/movie/album are you always surprised isn't considered a classic?

I meet so many fantasy lovers who have never read Robin Hobb. She is fantastic!

What are you reading/listening to/watching right now?

Right now I'm reading *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman, *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich, *A Scanner Darkly* by Philip K. Dick and *Wonderbook* by Jeff Vandermeer, which is a really fabulous guide to creative writing based in science fiction.

[Editor's note: The library owns all of these titles apart from *Wonderbook*, which we have just ordered. Thanks for the recommendation, Tana!]

Do you use the library as an adult? What do you think libraries will (or should) look like in twenty years? What would you like to see us doing now to pave the way?

I love the library! As a theatre-maker, I would love to see a space in every library that can be booked out for rehearsals and public readings of new work at an affordable price. (A space like this would be particularly useful for devised work, since so much of the research happens alongside the physical exploration.) As it becomes easier and easier to get information from our personal computers, the relationship between the library and the artistic community seems more and more important - in this generation, the library isn't just a place we go to get information, it is a place we go to have a creative experience.

...You can find Tana online at tanasirois.wix.com/tanasiroisactor.

Interview

Hair Stylist Chelsey Drapeau

Laura Horwood-Benton



A native of Wells, ME, Chelsey Drapeau describes herself as drawing “inspiration from organic sources such as flowers, crustaceans, natural patterns and the cycle of tides.” A love for art transformed into hair design, where she “perceives every work as a different form of beauty, romantic, dark, raw...” Drapeau is the Creative Director at Jessica Todd Salon, and has worked on independent creative projects and at New York Fashion Week.

What keeps you in the Seacoast area?

I love the quality of life and the area and the accessibility.

Describe Portsmouth in one sentence!

The mini city.

What led you to hair styling as a career?

I hit a fork in the road - hair school or art school? I was always doing my friends' hair growing up, so that led me to my choice. What better way to make people feel good about themselves?

Hair & makeup are arts usually practiced commercially - for private clients or for brand marketing. Your work with Michael Winters is art for art's sake. It's a strange intersection - a high fashion aesthetic without the money. How do you feel about that? Did you come to it intentionally? In what ways do you find it freeing?

Unfortunately our area doesn't allow for a lot of editorial work. I have done paid gigs in the past but they never allowed for much creative freedom. Michael and I see eye to eye creatively so it just made sense to collaborate.

Who are your role models? Where do you find inspiration?

Any strong woman is my role model. Any woman brave enough to stray away from conformity and fight for what they believe in is a role model to me. I am inspired by all types of culture and the reality of everyday life for each and every being - no life is greater than another. Every life is inspiring.

What do you look for in a creative partner/collaborator?

I look for a creative partner who is willing to push the limit. The only expectation that matters is being "better" than you were yesterday.

What are you working on/fascinated by right now?

I am fascinated by street fashion and the way people present themselves to the world. I am pretty classic in my fashion so I always wonder what the thought process is behind the way people portray themselves.

How long did it take to create Tana's

hairstyle [in the photoshoot featured on our cover]? Anything else you want to share about the project?

The creative process starts long before the execution of the look. I read the hair as I work and often times my initial idea transforms.

We had a bunch of wire and we had to do something with it. Tana turned into this withdrawn human robot hybrid.

Did you visit the library as a child? What was your favorite thing to do there?

All the time. I was obsessed with renting the Shelley Duvall *Faerie Tale Theatre* VHS tapes.

[Editor's note: we were big fans of this classic 1980s series, too. It stars so many famous actors in crazy roles. If you're getting nostalgic, don't worry. We have Faerie Tale Theatre on DVD in Youth Services. Check it out today!]

What book/movie/album are you always surprised isn't considered a classic?

Worker in the Light: Unlock Your Five Senses and Liberate Your Limitless Potential by George Noory. Just read it.

[Editor's note: we don't have a copy in the library, but you can request this title through Inter Library Loan.]

What are you reading/listening to/watching right now?

I just Netflix binge watched *Witches of East End*. Cheesy or not - I'm obsessed with the supernatural and spirit world even if it's on a TV show.

Do you use the library as an adult? What do you think libraries will (or should) look like in twenty years? What would you like to see us doing now to pave the way?

I love a book in my hand. I think the tradition should be preserved so that no child or adult loses the adventure of visiting the library.

...You can find Chelsey online at Chelseyd.com and jessicatodd.com.