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Steven Leigh Morris Hatches Debut Novel *Fowl Play*

Amy Lyons · Wednesday, March 23rd, 2016

Longtime Los Angeles theatre critic Steven Leigh Morris's debut novel is ostensibly about chickens and plays. While it's true that roosters, hens, and the Los Angeles theatre scene feature prominently in *Fowl Play*, the book's most essential and compelling story is that of a man moving toward re-birth.

Seth Jacobson is lead drama critic for the alt weekly *L.A. Observer*. If he's not riding his bike to work, he's muscling a Honda Accord through brutal traffic to make curtain calls in Hollywood, Topanga Canyon, and myriad far flung destinations on the Los Angeles theatre map. Though sub-par shows are a wearying part of the job, deft productions of smart plays serve as Seth's lifeblood. Being an advocate for truth and beauty is his *raison d'être*, and he tackles that goal with commitment and heart.

So when Seth's position is pared down, along with thirty percent of his pay and access to health benefits, he suffers sleepless nights and feels "an intractable sense of erosion all around him, from his job situation to the priorities of a culture, which just seemed to be shifting away from everything that mattered to him." This erosion extends to his marriage, as his Russian wife spends dwindling blocks of time in the U.S.

Seth's slide toward rock bottom slows when he makes a gorgeous, brave move toward light and love, feverishly implementing a plan to hatch and rear chickens in his Hollywood apartment. The novel absolutely shines during these scenes of obsessive trial-and-error, do-it-yourself incubation. While it's fun to see real-life small theatres in Los Angeles—like Theatre Asylum and The Hudson—get ink as we track Seth's professional life, Morris is at his narrative best when he turns the story toward the protagonist's avian obsession. Morris writes straight into the practical heart of the absurd matter, furnishing all the nail-biting details of shoebox-and-lightbulb temperature control, yellow yolks vs. orange yolks, round-the-clock egg monitoring, eyedroppers, screwdrivers, and several bouts of failure before life finally comes triumphantly pecking out of four shells housed at the bottom of a bedroom closet. The only way to get the job done is with tools and tenacity, and Morris's precise outlining of the failed attempts makes the victory a rewarding payoff. The writing here takes on an urgent pace that maps to Seth's internal angst; he can't concentrate on his paid work, a review of *The Cherry Orchard*, because his mind is bent on birth. When his wife asks where the chickens will live and how their presence will impact the furniture, he views the interrogation as "foolish, trivial questions to ask anyone who, like any of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard*, was passing through one new era into the next."

The chickens bring joy and purpose to Seth's life, at first uniting him with his neighbors in the common cause of raising a brood in a shared backyard space. But when the rooster of the bunch, Agamemnon, starts cock-a-doodle-doo-ing, petty fights and minor blowups escalate quickly into acts of violence with Russian mafia ties, and an entirely absurdist appearance by Joseph Stalin.

Morris says that though the book reflects some real-life events, he chose the novel form over memoir in order to retain the surrealist elements.

“You can’t have Joseph Stalin come crashing through the ceiling during an HOA meeting in a memoir,” Morris said. “I’m interested in the absurdity of life, especially as it is playing out right now on our political stage. Agamemnon is a bit like Donald Trump: he crows all day, he’s violent, and he doesn’t care what other people say.”

This impulse toward absurdity and social satire serve the novel well; the screaming matches between Seth’s neighbors bear a frightening resemblance to the recent presidential debates.

It’s no surprise that *Fowl Play* resonates with the deep love and complexity of consciousness that has elevated Morris’s theatre writing for more than two decades and made it an essential element of the larger conversation about culture and politics. Matt Walker, Director of the Troubadour Theater Company, says Morris has been “especially important to my life in L.A. Theatre.”

“If it weren’t for him,” Walker said, “I’d have a much simpler vocabulary. If you’ve read his reviews you know that to fully comprehend the scope and breadth of his knowledge you need a good grasp of the theatrical landscape, a strong sense of socio-political implications, and a thesaurus. People often refer to LA theater as a community, and that’s because people like Steven Leigh have worked for many years to make that so.”

Fowl Play, A Novel in Three Acts has just been published by Los Angeles based Padaro Press (an imprint of Huqua Press, huquapress.com), with the digital version being released by digital publishing company Open Road Media.

Steven Leigh Morris is the Executive Director of LA STAGE Alliance and founding editor of digital arts venture Stage Raw. A recipient of the Critic of the Year prize by the National Entertainment Journalism Awards for his work with *LA WEEKLY*, Morris chaired the jury for the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2012. His theater features have also been published in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *American Theater Magazine*, *Back Stage* and *Drama* magazine in London. His play *Beachwood Drive* was produced in Los Angeles and off-Broadway.

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