

ALEXANDRA JACOBS | BOOKS OF THE TIMES

The Man Who Wrote Just About Everything

Gay Talese recalls ink-stained colleagues, shares trade secrets and excavates marital ruins.

GAY TALESE HAS A TIC. I want to get this out of the way because in general I have such tremendous admiration for the man: that debonair eminence of yé olde New Journalism who is both a living landmark of Manhattan and his own best character. It's a writerly tic, the retro habit of referring to women by the color of their hair, but as noun rather than adjective. "A slender and attractive brunette." "A slender and stylish honey blonde in a ponytail." "A gregarious young brunette." "A perky and heavily perfumed brunette in a red cocktail dress." At least silver foxes, of which the natty Talese, 91, is a prime example, get the courtesy of being compared to a clever animal. If occasionally feeling as if you're trapped

fast be served to club members that morning — is the kind of indelible "subsidiary character" in which Talese specializes.

Indeed, Talese's relative indifference to celebrity is what ensured his own. Long before "quiet quitting" there was Bartleby's phrase "I would prefer not to." That's the essence of what Talese first replied to Harold Hayes, the editor of then-mighty Esquire, when asked to write the profile that would become perhaps the most venerated in magazine history, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" (1966). The article would inspire countless lesser talents to circle whatever famous subject they couldn't corner for 40 minutes over a Cobb salad and contort the result into a florid narrative for the glossies.

Part 2 of "Bartleby and Me" is the story behind the Sinatra story, and even the story behind the story behind the Sinatra story: a chart of Talese's notes published in the same issue, wherein the author cusses out and expresses his mistrust of Hayes.

Revealed are a few tools and tricks of the Talesian trade, among them the 7-by-3 card-board squares, salvaged from his laundered dress shirts, that he uses for notetaking, sometimes from the privacy of a bathroom stall. (Talese's habit of neglecting to use a tape recorder, along with special interests that could be called prurient — massage parlors and motel voyeurism among them — has led some journalism watchdogs to bark.) Another, more compelling tic: his familiar method of linking disparate individuals in a sort of baton-passing from chapter to chapter.

Part 1 is about Talese's tenure at The New York Times, where a more seasoned reporter once advised him, "Young man, never interview anyone over the phone if you can help it." (Compared with email, text and Gchat, of course, the phone now seems like a holy relic.)

Renowned for his epic book about this newspaper and its leaders, "The Kingdom and the Power" (1969), an ur-text of media studies, Talese here pans over its underlings and undersung — the linotype operators and printers, a substantial number of them "dead mates," who would repair for drinks to Gough's Chop House in actually ink-stained four-corner hats; and copyreaders, those "private, pensive and pondering individuals."

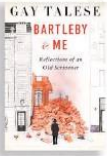
He zeros in on one of them, Alden Whitman, who became a chief obituary writer (he called himself the "happy oarsman on the Styx"), whom Talese also profiled for Esquire, with considerably more access than Sinatra gave. The piece got Whitman a seat next to Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show." These were different times.

Talese has tried, and by many lights failed, at straightforward memoir before, namely the 2006 rambler "A Writer's Life." "Bartleby and Me" is more of an ambler, in which he appears to give his finger to the form by filigreeing a couple of his ironclad hits and then tacking on a new gargoyles of a tale. He's done it his way, and one can imagine him and Sinatra's ghost sharing a song-and-dance number, a couple of satisfied sailors on the town.



In his new collection, Gay Talese shares details about how he put together some of his most celebrated articles.

Bartleby and Me: Reflections of an Old Scrivener
By Gay Talese
Mariner Books
\$28.99.



in a Peter Arno cartoon is the price of admission to a new work by Talese, sign me up. But only one chunk of his latest book, "Bartleby and Me," from which the above quotations are drawn, can fairly be called new. That is Part 3, the story of Nicholas Bartha, the Romanian émigré and doctor who blew up his multimillion-dollar Upper East Side townhouse in 2006, killing himself in the process, rather than sell it and let his ex-wife have the proceeds, as a judge had ordered.

What happened after the resultant 900,000 pounds of debris were cleared away involves "a glamorous 40-year-old Russian-born blonde named Ianna Bullock," the real-estate developer and fixture of Page Six whom Talese, also an Upper East Sider, refers to, more originally, as "the contessa of flippers." It's a plot for the ages, and right in his own backyard.

Named in homage to the classic short story by Herman Melville, "Bartleby and Me" alludes both to Talese's own status as a self-described "old scrivener" and to the humbler figures that have most captured his interest over a long career: doormen, chauffeurs, cooks, clerks, cleaners, cups, alley cats, the last marcher in a parade. (This is a writer who seems to assemble biographical files even for pieces of limestone.) Jack Vergara — a veteran waiter at the neighboring Links Club who noticed the smell of gas emanating from the doomed townhouse, called Con Ed and insisted that only a cold break-

New York's Gleaming Arts Center Welcomes the World

Performances by global artists will inaugurate the Perelman theater at ground zero.

By JON PARELES

The first public events at the new \$500 million Perelman Performing Arts Center, the opulent theater near the World Trade Center site, are deliberately laden with symbolism. The center is opening its doors with five shows running Tuesday through Saturday, collectively titled "Refuge: A Concert Series to Welcome the World."

Each concert offers a different kind of refuge as its theme: Home, Faith, School, Family and Memory. Home (Tuesday) presents musicians who gravitated to New York City from around the world; Family (Friday) has sibling and multigenerational groups. School (Thursday) features musicians who have made education an integral part of their work.

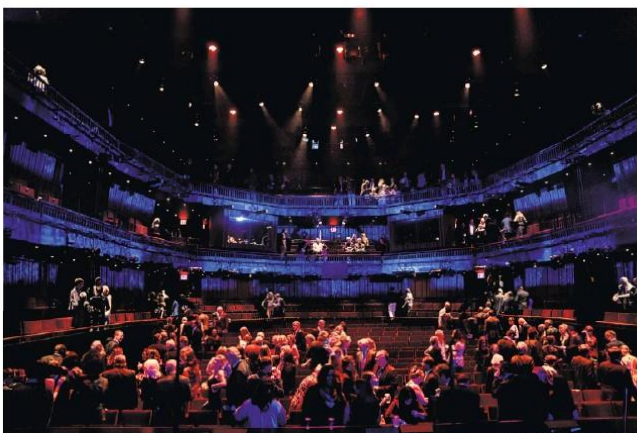
The series affirms the city's diversity with an international lineup that includes Grammy-winning stars — Angélique Kidjo on Tuesday, Common on Thursday, José Feliciano on Saturday — along with lesser-known musicians dedicated to preserving and extending deep-rooted traditions. The program for Devotion: Faith as Refuge, on Wednesday, includes klezmer music from the Klezmatics, electronic transformations of Afro-Cuban Yoruba incantations by Ifé and Moroccan Sufi trance music from Innov Gnawa.

Two decades after the Sept. 11 attacks, the center's artistic director, Bill Rauch, describes the Perelman's mission as "civic healing."

"We want to say that everyone is welcome," Rauch said. "There's a lot of trauma and resilience on our part of the island that we want to honor. You know, there were 93 countries represented in the people who lost their lives on 9/11. And so it's important that we welcome as many different artists and audiences into our building as possible."

The Perelman joins a New York arts landscape full of big-budget performing arts institutions, from Lincoln Center to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to the Shed. Is the scene too crowded? "When every man, woman and child who lives in the five boroughs of New York City has a life that is saturated in performing arts, then we can begin to talk about whether there's too much," Rauch said.

Although the new arts center is a monumental marble cube with elaborate techno-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROKO MASUZUMI/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from top: opening night at the Perelman Performing Arts Center; a site dedicated to "civic healing"; Angélique Kidjo and the dancer Supaman.



logical underpinnings — theaters that can be configured more than five dozen ways, sitting on foot-thick rubber supports to insulate them from subway noise — the tickets for the inaugural shows were priced pay-what-you-will from \$15-120. Most of the concerts are sold out, but some will feature free after-parties in the Perelman's public lobby. Forró in the Dark, which

plays upbeat music from Northeast Brazil, follows Tuesday's show. The center plans frequent free lobby performances.

Arturo O'Farrill, the pianist who leads the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra, is performing on Wednesday in the "School as Refuge" concert. He founded the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance, which provides instruments and music lessons to public-school students in New York City. When the center was being built, O'Farrill was part of an advisory committee of artists; he urged the center to pay close attention to acoustics. "I found it incredibly welcoming to artists' voices," O'Farrill said. "That's not always the case with institutions."

He added, "Bill's a very forward-looking person. This programming is about community. He's a very thoughtful man, and he's looking to expand the conversation on what performing arts is, what elitism does to the arts. He's not interested in perpetuating elitism."

Laurie Anderson, who is to perform on Tuesday, is pragmatic but hopeful about the center's future. "Sometimes a place opens and it never finds its audience," she said. "I always like it when it's opened up to the people who live in the neighborhood, but nobody lives in that neighborhood; it's mostly abandoned offices now. So how do you make a community out of a bunch of empty offices? We'll see. Maybe you make it by bringing music that's just so incredible that everybody wants to get on the subway and go down there. That would be great."

Kidjo, the clarion-voiced singer and songwriter whose albums have connected West African music to the Americas and Europe, was enthusiastic about the center's inaugural statement. "We are all refugees from somewhere," she said. In 1983, she fled to Paris from the dictatorship in her homeland, Benin; she now lives in Brooklyn. "I think that each one of us, we have the responsibility and the duty to welcome somebody that is in a dire situation. For a performing arts center to support that speaks straight to my heart. Because everybody needs a place to put your load down and say, 'I've found a place.'"

She added: "We have a special status after what happened on 9/11 — to prove our openness to the rest of the world. And we have the place called the Perelman Center right next to ground zero that is open to the whole world. It's just the beginning. We have to live up to the promise."

PRINTED AND DISTRIBUTED BY PRESSRECORDER
PressRecorder.com • 1-800-776-4664
©2023 THE NEW YORK TIMES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.