



Playwright David Hancock: In his recent *The Convention of Cartography*, some audience members realized that his narration of “Mike’s” adventures was completely invented, some believed it was completely factual, and most couldn’t make up their minds until they picked up a program as they left. Since this confusion between authenticity and creativity was one of the major themes of the evening, reviewers of the show had to be careful not to reveal its “secret”—and a feature was only possible after the show had closed.

David Hancock's Theaterephemera

A note to Voice readers: Originally, we planned to offer in this space a feature on playwright David Hancock, whose *The Convention of Cartography* ran through July at the Alley Cat Gallery on 17th Street, produced by Melanie Joseph's Foundry Theatre. Unfortunately, John Istel, the writer assigned to the piece, missed deadlines and would not return phone calls. Just before the *Voice* went to press, a battered manila envelope was delivered to the editorial offices. Inside, we found a memo clipped to assorted note cards, scribbles on yellow Post-its, torn pages from notebooks and diaries, and bits of computer printouts with passages from Istel's interviews with Hancock circled. With no other recourse, the editors have taken the unusual step of patching together the following feature on Hancock from these scraps. We apologize for any confusion occasioned by the disappearance of the author.

[Cover memo, last known communication with Istel, 8/3/94]
TO: Theater ed., *Village Voice*
RE: David Hancock and *The Convention of Cartography* article

I have done the unforgiveable. I pleaded for more time and then . . . screw it. I hope you understand. You saw Hancock's "play." You know how disconcerting the experience was. Finding that little two-room house tucked at the end of a narrow alley in the middle of Manhattan. (Did you know the script calls for the museum to be in an Airstream trailer but the producer didn't want to hassle getting an exemption to alternate-side-of-the-street parking rules from the city?) Then being ushered into the living room where your mind begins seizing up trying to semiotically decipher performance codes. No playbill. No set. No lights. No costumes. Four strange objects under plexiglass, including a motor and a grimy baseball cap.

Then Hancock, just a bit too handsome to pass for the son of

Roger Ebert, introduced himself as "curator" of the collected artworks of some guy named "Mike." Remember how he fiddled with those index cards all the time and kept squirreling up his forehead, pushing his spectacles back on the bridge of his nose? I remember thinking, "I paid a baby-sitter for this."

But when he pointed to the objects and said, "These are some of Mike's things," suddenly "Mike" became real, kind of. Then this "curator" passed around a sample of one of Mike's truckstop poems scribbled on a place mat framed neatly under glass. Was this authentic? I held it in my hand. Seemed so. And the cigar box sculptures "Mike" created and left for strangers to find in highway rest-stop bathrooms, or on top of gas station soda machines. We all touched those objects. We were all co-conspirators in Hancock's storybook charade.

I sat there watching a videotape of Mike (if I stop using quotation

marks around his name does he become real?) at his North Carolina home, which seemed pretty hokey and staged though some people swallowed it. Then suddenly, Hancock'd fast-forward. Did I miss something? And I kept waiting for the "drama" to begin. (God! See. Now the word *drama* appears in quotes.) So sitting there I thought maybe his "wife" (the character) would start a fight or Mike would burst in the room and claim his "artworks" (here quotes signify illusions). Maybe it would turn out that the curator, a self-professed failed artist, killed Mike to steal the glory and raise the price of the work. But no. Nothing happened. No "dramatic" revelation.

So I wandered into the next room with the rest of the visitors and gazed at this flea market bric-a-brac fashioned into little altars of . . . art? Homages to Joseph Cornell? Who could have made all this stuff? Were they props? Were they "found" artworks used as props?

Are they valuable? Will they become so if Hancock becomes famous? These are a fraction of the questions that came to mind.

Hancock told me that when he was a kid growing up in Cape Cod and upstate New York he hated the way actors treated stage props so cavalierly, as if they weren't invested with a real life of their own. He was fascinated by their ability to be both real and illusion, to be simultaneously Macbeth's throne and one of the school's desk chairs. Hancock's objects engender layers of stories, stories

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that don't exist outside material reality. Or do they?

Remember the "wife"? Hancock assured me that the woman playing his "wife"—serving seltzer, ushering, helping us as we one-by-one peeped into the eyehole in a cigar box illuminated by a penlight—he swore this actress was his real-life wife. Well, his second, actually. Sometime in the late 1980s, after he got his MFA in playwriting at U. of Iowa, they eloped and managed a bar in North Carolina. At least that was the story. . . .

See, I expected "theater" because . . . well . . . I am writing for the theater section, right? So I expected . . . certain "conventions" or signposts like maps. Ahh. Now I get it.

In the last of the many drafts I began for this article I described Hancock as "a postmodern American Pirandello who employs the medicine show hucksterism of Paul Zaloom." (God, now I'm quoting myself!) Then that line made me rip up the piece—that description sucks Fruit Loops. "We"—the "we" of critics—can't stop referring to "standard" works, piling reference onto reference, narrowing down the meaning of those artworks that, like Hancock's plays, defy closure. But what's left? Only the raw experience? Is that why Artaud went insane?

[Torn scrap from Hancock's script for *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*]

"Jilly and I were always inventing languages. She had a language of colors and a language of license plates. Most people think that a language is to communicate, but it's really to keep strangers out of your head."

[Istel's diary entry excerpt dated July 13, 1994]
Just saw *The Convention of Cartography*. "Museum" felt strangely like a box, a coffin or bric-a-brac, filled with stuff I used to covet: little maps, old motel postcards, and handwritten poems scribbled on record jackets. Artist somehow seemed captured but absent. Shown on video, another "box," forming series of Chinese boxes. Interpreting how both spectators and readers of art and literature always search so desperately for the artist—all 20 of us at this show plunking around, like we were Pirandello's characters searching for an author.

[Diary excerpt dated July 23, 1994]
My head's bursting. Everything I just read... [crossed out section illegible]... see and enjoy it. I have it. Tell them he writes "good stories." The main character who

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SKID ROE? CHIC EATS COME TO THE BOWERY

SAINT MISBEHAVIN': D.A. CHASES NUN IN VOTE S

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makes up the 13 stories that form *Ark Tattoo* is named Homer, after all. Hancock feeds off our craving for authenticity. Does he create plays or script experiences? The *Convention* program defines him a writer, designer, and performer. Is that his real name, I wonder? For what is "Hancock" but a code for a famous signature which is code for an historical person?

[Note appearing on back of index card—on front, Istel's mother-in-law's recipe for "John Wayne Casserole"]

Hancock's facts: Born Jersey City. 31 yrs. old. Written many plays. Borges big influence. *Gran-nideer* (1985) about conspiracy of Esso stations and toxic spills that took place around leaf-covered stage where audience visited stations set up like dioramas. *Ho-Che-Parro-T* composed solely of stage directions in response to directing graduate who claimed he was taught to cross out all stage directions. Play had to do with Vietnam and Boston mass transit, audience disappeared through bus locker and heard crazy vet who constructed diorama but spoke with electronic voice box. Ultimately, you find out he was hiding in the walls.

[Index card note—typewritten]

D.H. wants to write in 1st, not 3rd person. Is that diff. bet. his objects and Tenn. W's in *Menagerie*? D.H. sez "Doesn't Narrator write poems on shoebox tops? Tom's prisoner of Williams's play. See, if I wrote the play, I'd have Tom pass the glass menagerie around the audience." Makes viewers active, complicit, experience immediate. Same reason cosmetic companies hire perfume spritzers, right?

[Circled passage of interview transcript; July 1994]

M.J. [producer Melanie Joseph]: One woman called him a "maggot" for living off the works of some dead folk artist, for not obeying Mike's wishes to destroy the artworks.

[Torn page from Istel's "reporter's notebook"]

DH working on new play *Deviant Craft* w/M.J., features 30 characters and 6 performers/mur-

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derers with cryptic dossiers & women building spacecraft of Tinkertoys, *National Geographic* covers: DH sez: "between seance & carnival."

[Circled portion of transcript of interview w/M.J. and D.H.]

D.H.: Can I read you this letter? This man attended a performance with his young daughter. [reading from letter] "I feel contempt for your masquerade. . . . It had meaning for us as a real story. . . . Art is genuine. I feel angry like Dorothy when she discovers the wizard behind the curtain."

[Diary entry, undated, coffee-stained, external evidence indicates written between July 30 and Aug. 2]

Started Hancock's earlier piece, *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*, which Sideshow by the Seashore impresario Dick Zigun called "the most interesting unsolicited script I've ever seen." Zigun produced it at his Coney Island theater last fall. The audience enters and sees a flea market setup run by a guy named Foster, a violence-prone foster child of a guy named Homer Phinney Jr. who wrote "story-cards" for every object in the flea market. Foster begins to tell the audience the stories—in whatever order the audience picks them out of his "story ark"—a large toy model Winnebago trailer. Foster "becomes" his foster father during each tale, emerging at the end dazed and confused.

The hidden menace in each gives me goose bumps—like the one Homer Phinney tells, occasioned by a length of rusted pipe,

about asking the "fosters" to the beach and watching one foster son (Foster?) smash horseshoe crabs with the pipe. Or the story of the child's bloody sock. Or of the jar of Vaseline. My past lives haunt me. Maybe my mother took me to too many garage sales. Maybe it's that my brother was killed by a foster child.

[Istel's performance notes on yellow Post-its, taken July 13]

Half-true stories or long suppressed memories?

In museum: dried cat, toy Greyhound bus, ancient reel-to-reel (Krapp's?)

Parrots: ceramic, parrot puzzle. Cornell?

Ida: Mike's insane girlfriend. Wife?

Last cigar box: each audience member peeks inside after sitting in chair. A new kind of holy com-

munion. Inside a picture of Ida and words: "You people know so little of my silence."

[Back of plain white envelope with word "THEMES" scribbled at top]

Nature of the role of the artist: homage to people who really may not be that nice. Young people feel need to prostrate themselves. Like young white males enthralled by "authentic folk artists." Like great blues players. "Out of some sense of guilt," D.H. insists.

D.H.'s frustration with traditional theater's build toward some inevitable climax.

D.H. believes audiences want to and are able to suspend their disbelief! Says he's not any more manipulative than documentary filmmaker who passes off her work as "true." Scared by those who "believe" documentaries.

[In the margin of the playbill submitted to the fact checker]

Irony. The more press Hancock receives, the less he'll be able to manipulate and surprise audiences. God, now I feel like a critic-maggot feeding off my subject. Yet Hancock wants his cover blown. "After all," he says, "I'm a playwright."

[Yellow Post-it attached to cover memo; separated at press]

PLEASE! Whatever you do, don't show this to anyone, even *Voice* staffers or interns. Or you may be called a "maggot" or worse, like Hancock was by those who believed his "masquerade" as a parasitic curator who displayed Mike's art works for personal gain against the artist's dying wishes. Ah, what a metaphor for betrayal, for the commodification of art and journalism. I beg you, burn this. ■