

## THE WRITER NEXT DOOR

### ELIOT WEINBERGER: A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

By Sue Jackson

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On the evening of 20 March 2006, the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, *Reading for Peace*, sponsored by Melbourne Pen, was staged at my local theatre, La Mama, in inner-city Melbourne. I wasn't a member of Pen back then, so a sparsely worded flyer handed to me at a peace rally some weeks prior was my only invitation. Although I'd had a long day, I went along because I wanted to mark the anniversary somehow, in the company of like-minded people. I had no idea what to expect.

Despite its proximity, the last time I had visited La Mama was as a student in the early '70s, when the Vietnam war was still dragging on. I remember tottering up the steep irregular wooden steps in my mini skirt and platforms, dipping my head to avoid my perm being snagged by the cables coiling down from the rafters. Negotiating those same steps in my sensible shoes, the passage of time inevitably sprang to mind. I reflected on the ways in which the world had changed in those decades, yet the same mistakes kept being made.

Ever since 2003, when the Iraq invasion was looming, and the Australian Government had climbed into bed with Bush and Blair, many people here became ashamed of being Australian. It was cold comfort that the international media, obviously rating us as totally inconsequential, frequently omitted to

mention Australia in the rollcall of the invaders. We were sure the Iraqi people would have no such amnesia.

On Valentine's Day 2003, in solidarity with the international protests, an estimated 200,000 Melburnians walked through the city to demonstrate their opposition to the war. And like so many others the world over, up until the day the bombs started raining on Baghdad, I never really believed it would happen. How wrong we were.

As La Mama's house lights began to dim, the first of the local readers appeared on stage. When he explained that the program consisted of a single long essay, *What I heard about Iraq in 2005*, written by Eliot Weinberger, someone I'd never heard of, I barely suppressed a groan. What an ask, I thought, at the end of a long working day. But looking around, I realised there was no way I could leave inconspicuously, so I settled back, with ill-grace, on my cramped, hard wooden seat.

I soon discovered that Eliot Weinberger is a marvellous writer. He is not, however, an obvious candidate for *writer-next-door* to us Melbournians. After all, he is a native of New York City, and you can't get much further from Melbourne than that. But in some important respects a 'hood writer is exactly what he is.

Firstly, I need you to suspend your disbelief for a moment while I explain how Eliot Weinberger and I could easily be neighbours.

For showcasing the writings of a New Yorker, the choice of La Mama was ideal. This rickety old theatre is possibly the closest link we have in Australia to the New York art scene of the late 1960s. Founded in 1967, it was actually styled on and named after the 'off-off- Broadway' theatre of the same name. Weinberger

and I are true contemporaries – our births separated by mere weeks – and as a young New York writer, he could well have hung out at an avant garde venue like La Mama at the very time I was tottering up the steps at its namesake.

Secondly, Weinberger is truly a citizen of the world, and as such, could be seen as the writer next door to all of us. He has been the recipient of many prestigious international awards for his writing, like the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle for translating the poetry of the Nobel Prize winner, Octavio Paz, into English. He is curator of the Berlin International Literature Festival and is acknowledged in the ‘Visitor’s Key to Iceland’. He was introduced recently at a festival as a ‘post-national’ writer. I’m keen to claim him for Melbourne because I found his essay so extraordinary.

*What I heard about Iraq* interweaves quotes from politicians, soldiers and Iraqi citizens, drawn mostly from the huge web of the US media. The refrain ‘I heard that...’, which precedes the quotes, is a reminder that typically it’s ‘hearsay’ rather than ‘truth’ that’s served up to us, so we need to become adept at reading between the lines. With ‘spin’ so ubiquitous, questioning the affiliations and motivations of the media becomes essential. Sadly, another casualty of this war is language itself - a particular affront to an audience of writers and readers.

The essay unfolds with no authorial exposition whatsoever. Yet by the process of selection, accumulation, repetition and juxtaposition of contrasting claims and counterclaims, Weinberger conveys both the duplicity of our leaders and the insanity of the war.

*I heard that the White House had deleted the chapter on Iraq from the annual Economic Report of the President, on the grounds that it did not conform with an otherwise cheerful tone.*

*I heard about happiness. I heard Lieutenant General James Mattis say that 'it's a lot of fun to fight' in Iraq. I heard him say: 'You know, it's a hell of a hoot. I like brawling.'*

*I heard Dick Cheney say: 'The level of activity that we see today, from a military standpoint, I think, will clearly decline. I think they're in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency.'*

*I heard Donald Rumsfeld say: 'Last throes could be a violent last throe, or a placid and calm last throe. Look it up in the dictionary.'*

*I heard the President say: 'See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda.'*

*I heard that the primary source of information about the tons of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons buried under Saddam's private villas and under Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad and throughout Iraq was a Kurdish exile called Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri. He was sponsored by the Rendon Group, a Washington public relations firm that had been paid hundreds of millions of dollars by the Pentagon to promote the war.*

As I listened, I found myself buffeted by an unexpected array of emotions. And I was not alone. All around me people groaned, gasped, wept and even

laughed out loud. Towards the end, the young woman next to me, a stranger, reached over and held my hand.

Weinberger's essay proved a great catalyst for connecting people, for making audience members feel 'next door' to each other. And the local readers, I learned after the event, were part of a much larger contingent. The *Reading for Peace* was staged simultaneously all over the world, in Cyprus, the Czech Republic, England, Germany, Greece, India, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland and the USA. In Durban, South Africa, on the opening night of the *Time of the Writer* International Writers' Festival, the author himself was a reader.

It is over two years since my night at La Mama, but I often think about it. The unadorned stage, the spotlight, the homeliness of the venue and the power of the ritual reading all contributed to the unique ambience. Yet in the end it was the weight of the words and their relentless accumulation that proved irresistible.

I heard that in 2006 a play, adapted by Simon Levy from Eliot Weinberger's essay, was the run-away winner of the Scotsman Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival.

I haven't heard that the company plans to tour Down-under. But if they ever do, I know the perfect venue. It's right next door.