

Actor, Editor, Writer, Playwright and Painter George Hitchcock

ONE MAN BOAT: THE GEORGE HITCHCOCK READER.

Edited by Joseph Bednarik, Mark Jarman, Robert McDowell.
Story Line Press, 2003. Paperback, \$18.95.

Literary Arts, the Portland organization that presents the annual Oregon Book Awards, salutes George Hitchcock on November 13 with the C.E.S. Wood Retrospective Award. To list Hitchcock's lifetime accomplishments to date is to recognize his lively wit, artistic sensibility and abundance of literary talents. Now in his 90th year, Hitchcock has created works that express a unique yet accessible vision of art lived as an actor, director and playwright; a poet; a writer of short fiction, novels and memoir; editor of *kayak*, an influential poetry magazine, 1964-1984; a sculptor and painter; a journalist, teacher, mentor, model; and a friend to the many who know and love him.

Hitchcock will read from the new anthology of his work, *One-Man Boat* (Story Line Press, 2003), at Lane Literary Guild's Windfall reading series that begins at 7 pm on Sept. 16 in the Eugene Public Library's Bascom-Tykeson room. Poet Meg Kearney will read from her first collection, *An Unkindness of Ravens* (BOA Editions, 2001).

In his nomination letter to the Oregon book awards judges, Joseph Bednarik, co-editor of *One-Man Boat*, notes that Hitchcock's "imagination is more playful, robust and penetrating than ever. He is a phenomenon and an inspiration." Regarding Hitchcock's McCarthy era testimony in 1957 before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Bednarik wrote: "His bold testimony was broadcast nationally on television, and his quick-witted response to the question 'What is your profession?' became legend: 'My profession is a gardener. I do underground work on plants.'"

My favorite exchange from the Congressional Record of Hitchcock's HUAC testimony comes when the committee's counsel asks, "Were you a member of the Communist Party yesterday? You said you are not today," and Hitchcock replies, "That is a delightful question. Am I directed to answer it?" The chairman says, "You are directed to answer it," to which the actor in Hitchcock answers, "I must decline; I wish to decline; I do decline."

Delight in being contrary to the status quo, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes and an assured flair for words and appearance distinguish Hitchcock today. During a recent interview at the Harrisburg home he shares with his longtime partner, poet Marjorie Simon, Hitchcock said he and Simon usually leave Oregon by October for La Paz, Mexico, where he owns a house. But this year they will stay until after the Oregon Book Awards ceremony in Portland.

"I don't write poetry or plays anymore," Hitchcock said. "I'm much more interested in the challenge of painting. I have to take a lot of foam-board and paints with me to Mexico, because I can't get them there. I paint every day when I'm there." A number of Mexican galleries carry his work, signed

Jorge Hitchcock, and he has had several one-man shows. Although he says, "I consider myself a Mexican painter," Candy Moffett's Alder Gallery in Coburg also carries his paintings and shows his work.

But theater was his first passion, long before he discovered poetry's pleasures or art's rewards. Through his writing directing and acting, Hitchcock was a leading light in the San Francisco renaissance of the 1950s and '60s, where original, local plays were discovered and honored. He calls theater "My true love."

His plays have been produced 36 times, he said, mostly at universities. In the preface to the book's "Plays" section, he writes: "Theater, as we all know, is a collective venture, and until a script takes form through voice, body and spirit of the actor it cannot presume to true existence."

Bednarik writes of Hitchcock's acting: "As an actor, Hitchcock brought drama to life, playing forty leading roles, usually in classical plays, and his role of Creon in *Antigone* was recorded and published by Columbia Records; he also acted in two-thirds of the Shakespearean canon as a member of several theater companies, including the Oregon Shakespeare Festival."

During the 35 years he lived in San Francisco, Hitchcock wrote plays for two now-defunct theatrical companies, The Interplayers and The Actor's Workshop.



"Both these companies shared a dislike of plastic commercial realism and were devoted to the theater as a way of life to be followed with Taoist fervor," Hitchcock wrote for the anthology, which includes *Prometheus Found* and *The Busy Martyr*. The latter is a clever send-up of the sort of self-serving lying that passes for our national political debate today. He also worked for eight years at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music "a couple of evenings a week," where he conducted acting and directing classes for opera.

After his immersion in theater, he began writing poems. Several years ago at a now-vanished restaurant on the mall, I heard

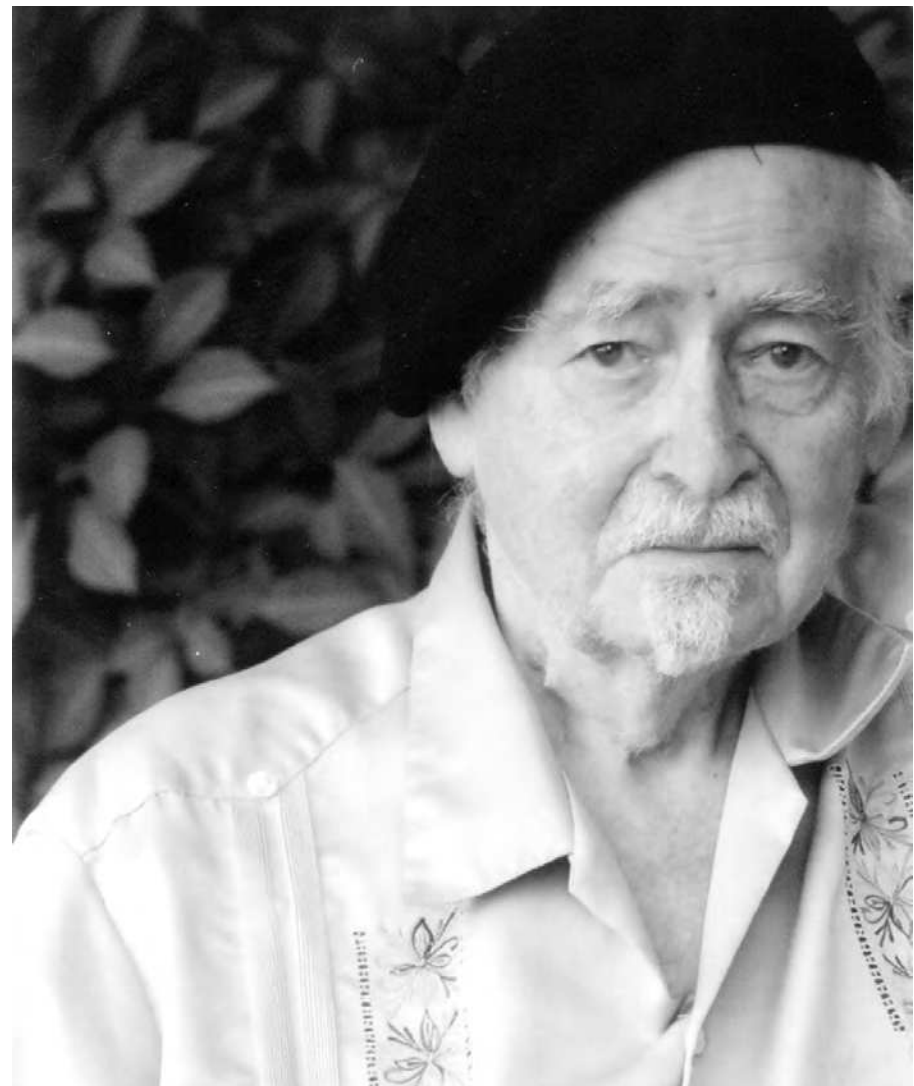


PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Hitchcock read found poems and marveled at the power of conviction in his voice. The anthology includes several found poems, including the one he read that night, "What to Say to the Pasha."

Hitchcock's original poem, "Botanizing again," celebrates the summer when George was 16 and carried the press book for his highly esteemed grandfather, botanist Louis F. Henderson, on a field trip through southern Oregon. Curator of the UO Herbarium in Eugene, Henderson and Hitchcock trekked from Eugene to Douglas County. Hitchcock writes of the "traffic of birds in / the summer air / flights and hoverings / rustle of / lizard or grouse" and of the "botanist's press banging / at my knees with its / absorbent papers and / burden of slain flowers."

For 20 years Hitchcock edited a literary magazine out of San Francisco that published unknown and famous poets alike, *kayak*. In the anthology's foreword, poet Phil Levine said poets welcomed the journal as "the most original and readable American poetry magazine in decades." During *kayak*'s publication, Hitchcock received an unsolicited grant of \$10,000 for "advancing the cause of unknown, obscure, or difficult writers," Bednarik notes. He used the money to publish small books of poetry by such now well-known writers as Philip Levine, Raymond Carver, Charles Simic and James Tate. Corvallis poet Clemens Starch was an early contributor and is still "a good friend," Hitchcock said.

In 1970, Hitchcock accepted a half-time teaching position at UC Santa Cruz, where he taught "everything" for 19 years, including magazine editing; playwriting workshops; poetry workshops; and the plays of

Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Eugene O'Neill. He was made a Regents Professor when he retired from teaching and moved to Oregon. Recently Hitchcock endowed UCSC's Porter College poetry program. "Pass it on to where it can do some good," he said.

During his years at Santa Cruz, he never taught winter quarter, taking off each year for Baja California. "I'm an Oregonian by birth and origin," he said, "but I've tried to arrange my schedule to be in Mexico every year." Besides the lure of warm, sunny weather and the joy of painting every day, Hitchcock said he and Marjorie host a regular weekly Saturday night at the movies for their friends. When he's in Oregon, he buys recent good movies from the \$5 used shelves in video stores to take to Mexico with him, he said. He doesn't paint here, though. "Too many distractions," he said.

Appropriately, Literary Arts' lifetime achievement award is named in honor of Charles Erskine Scott Wood, another larger-than-life Oregonian. "I met Wood at an anti-fascist rally," Hitchcock said. "He was a speaker, along with Upton Sinclair. Wood had a long beard and a frontier look about him." A graduate of West Point in the 1870s, Wood served as a colonel in the U.S. Army during the Indian Wars. He later practiced law in Portland, then moved to California where, Hitchcock said, he wrote a "sensational book, *Heavenly Discourse*, that was really alive."

Don't miss this opportunity to hear a local son whose contribution to American letters and arts is an ongoing delight. At 7 to 9 pm on Tuesday, Sept. 16 in the Bascom/Tykeson Conference Room, Eugene Public Library. Free. **EW**