



# Production Guide



# A Murder of Crows

by Mac Wellman

directed by James Ostholthoff

**February 15 - 24, 2002**



at DePaul's Merle Reskin Theatre  
60 E. Balbo Drive, Chicago

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## A Mythology of Crows: What Do They Mean to Us?

The term “a murder of crows” refers to a flock of crows. The American Society of Crows and Ravens website defines the phrase “a murder of crows” as “the persistent but fallacious folk tale that crows form tribunals to punish the bad behavior of a member of the flock. If the judgment goes against the defendant, that bird is killed (murdered).”

The crow is a bird associated with much negative connotation. It is often regarded as a shameless and crude thief that will eat the scraps of a more revered creature’s meal. A crow’s “caww!” is not beautiful music nor is its appearance overtly attractive. Crows are believed to be signifiers of ill omens, bringing unhappiness, misfortune and danger.

Alaskan and Native American folklore portrays crows as crafty, conniving creatures that relentlessly trick others in order to selfishly gain food or power. There are many Old English tales of crows loitering around a sick person’s residence immediately preceding that person’s death. Writers such as William Shakespeare and William Blake hauntingly dramatize the crow’s perilous effect on humans, inciting fear and horror at the thought of them. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, crows arrive to signify the looming danger: “Crows, and Kites Fly ore our heads. . .their shadowes seeme A Canopy most fatall, under which Our Army lies, ready to give up the Ghost.” (Act 5, Scene 1)

All of this harsh judgment upon crows and what they represent is merely the result of a superficial examination. It is true that crows are inextricably connected with evildoing and dread, yet if one explores their symbolism even further he or she will find that these mysterious birds mean so much more.

“If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows,” wrote the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, famed orator of the 19th Century. Crows are considered to be the most intelligent of birds.

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According to some sources, crows can count up to seven and designate guards to keep watch while the “murder” eats or bathes. They have been seen using objects as tools, a trait some scientists believe only primates are capable of doing. Crows have a tight family unit, are very social and faithfully mate for life. They defend and protect their family and each other with immense devotion. While crows normally signify danger or death, they also represent prophets and existence on a superior plane of knowledge. Crows also have a religious connotation. When St. Benedict fasted so intensely as to be on the brink of starvation, a crow brought him nourishing food.

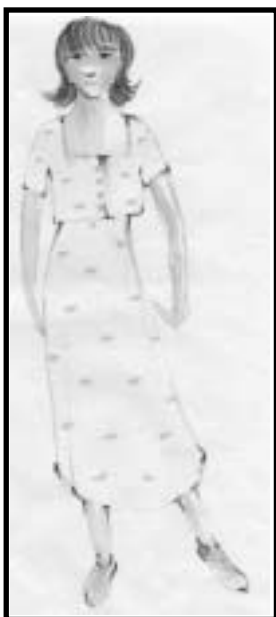
These curiously complex birds contain a peculiarity. Their ugly, black feathers instill fear, yet their loyal manner of relating to fellow crows gives way to a sense of pride and dignity.



A crow’s simultaneous existence as an indication of evil and a bringer of enlightenment is interesting in considering their role in Mac Wellman’s play, *A Murder of Crows*. When Raymond “crept off to live among the crows,” what did he do exactly? Wellman’s crows are a hybrid of philosophy and instinct, abstraction and actuality, the mind and the body. These are characteristics the crows exhibit; what they represent is much more obscure. In the same way that the mythology of crows mixes evolving ideas concerning superstition and spirituality, Wellman’s crows exist as a combination man's primal nature accompanied by his intellectual drive to ascertain life meaning. In this way, they are a mixture of thoughts. What these thoughts contain is up to us, the audience of Wellman’s play: an art that is intellectually elusive and strikingly exciting at the same time.

## **A Costume Gallery for *A Murder of Crows***

**Renderings by Vivian Pavlos**



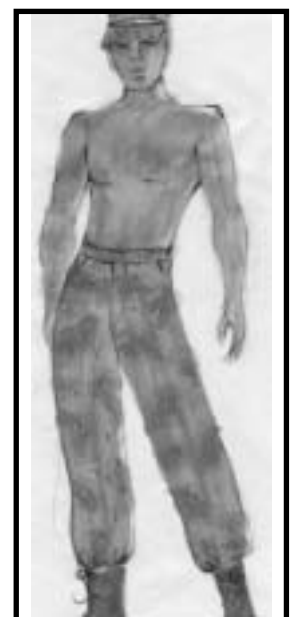
*Susannah*



*Crow #1*



*Georgia*



*Andy*

# ***A Murder of Crows: An Experiential Staging***

In a March, 2001, interview with Mac Wellman in *American Theatre Magazine*, the playwright was asked, “What’s the tackiest thing in your life?” He responded, “The task of explaining my work ad infinitum to uncomprehending people. This society thrives on explanations.”

The Theatre School is doing something different with its production of Mac Wellman’s *A Murder of Crows*: the audience will be seated onstage at DePaul’s Merle Reskin Theatre. The play revolves around Susannah, an outcast teenager who has an affinity for the constantly changing aspect of the weather. Susannah attempts to acquire an understanding of existence amid her wildly peculiar relatives and the unsolvable condition of her problematic environment.

Wellman creates a habitat far from reality with poetic language and character actions that are bizarre and lack logical motivation. Wellman’s play is neither beyond theatre nor theatre itself; it has no established position in the conservative world of definitions. The play does not preach, but it is not unmoving either. The play lingers in a state of theatrical limbo: projecting everything in its nothingness. There the question arises: how should this play be staged? What type of space can justify this work without staining its true essence?

The staging techniques of the ancient Greeks’ circular, stadium-seating auditoriums, the Medieval dramatizations of the Bible produced in churches and William Shakespeare’s open-air Old Globe Theatre in Elizabethan England were all relevant to the content of their productions. Yet, as thoughts and ideas evolved throughout the centuries, philosophies concerning aesthetic presentation changed as well.

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that theatrical Realism—the idea that theatre should imitate life as closely as possible—became a jaded viewpoint in the dramatic world. Playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee began to experiment with Absurdism: the notion that the human condition is absurd or meaningless, and any attempt to find logic in life is futile. (Absurdist theatre contains ludicrous character behavior, nonsensical dialogue and a hopeless attitude towards the possibility of discovering any genuine meaning of life.)

The relationship between the performers and the audience changed with the Absurdist Movement; theatrical space evolved to reflect these new ideas. The definition of a theatrical space began to grow broader, eventually including sites such as subways, warehouses or the street. Theatre sought to become closer to its audience, evoking innovative perceptions about the boundaries society places in between art and the viewer. The artist and the audience were to become more intimate, giving rise to a more effective osmosis of philosophical concepts and dramatic meaning.

Although Wellman has roots in the Absurdist playwrights who created theatre pieces that relentlessly question reality and expose the hypocrisy of society’s supposedly moral intentions, he is a little different. Wellman theatre is not hopeless. So where does this playwright fit in? Indeed, *A Murder of Crows* cannot be categorized or placed neatly into a genre. Language is important to Wellman, but definition is not. Words like “experimental,” “surreal” or “absurdist” have no purpose in the playwright’s world. In considering this concept, it is difficult to pinpoint who Wellman really is, or what his play is really about. How does one stage this?

To truly experience Wellman is to fully immerse oneself inside his head, surrendering to his linguistic explorations. There should be no explanations, definitions or established clarity of thought. Experiencing Wellman is like getting lost in a painting or not knowing where a musical composition begins or ends. How can a normal staging of his play be effective at all. Disrupting the audience’s accepted views of how far away they should be from the action of the play changes their theatrical experience altogether.

“Experience.” Bringing the audience onstage questions the established notion that the spectator is separate from the art he or she is witnessing. Wellman breaks the normal make-up of a play; to use the theatrical conventions that he attacks is to betray Wellman’s theatrical objectives. A staging that challenges the set laws of theatrical presentation is the first step towards allowing the audience to experience Wellman’s unique poetry.

# Understanding Mac Wellman: The Journey that Never Began. . .or Did It?

“Artists and thinkers of our time are engaged in a war against meaning. Or rather, against the tyrannical domination of meanings so fixed, so absolute, as to render the means of meaning, which is to say the heart and soul of meaning, a mere phantom.”

— *Mac Wellman*, “The Theatre of Good Intentions”

Wow. Mac Wellman must be so frustrated with us stupid people. Fixed meaning isn't that bad. It can be really moving. *The Glass Menagerie* is really moving. Doesn't he have any emotions? What does he mean by that statement? Wellman is criticizing today's artists who attempt to find meaning. Wait, no he's not. He's upset because people are relying too heavily on perfectly packaged definitions. Yeah, that's what he means. . .

In my efforts to grasp Mac Wellman's ideas, I often went through phases of academic trauma similar to the paragraph above. On a first read, his words seem as if they are saying a certain statement. It is narrow-minded and bitter, at first, and then severely complex. This is where the confusion sets in. I know Wellman is saying something philosophically clever and multifaceted, but I don't know what the lesson is exactly. I attempt to let go of my need to define everything, and prod deeper into the meaty layers of “Wellmanian” tongue. Only when I do this can I articulate what I theorize his poetry to signify. This process is exhausting.

In a scene from Wellman's play *A Murder of Crows* Susannah, Nella's daughter, discloses her apocalyptic vision:

“Everything that is vertical will become horizontal. Seven feet, with unusual shoes on them, will emerge from seven open doors, doors previous locked tight shut. X will lead Y into the night, which will blaze up bright as day. A big pink passle of wind will stream out of a billowy, purple cloud and ask each and every one of us a thing or two he'd like to know.”

Nella responds with “What in the name of Sam Hill do you do with a child who talks like that?”

In a March 2001 interview with *American Theatre*, Mac Wellman was asked, “What's the tackiest thing in your life?” He responded, “The task of explaining my work ad infinitum to uncomprehending people. This society thrives on explanations.” What in the name of Sam Hill do you do with a playwright who talks like that?

## Dictionaries are Useless

“Obflisticated?” Is that even a word? Well, it's not in Webster's so it can't be a word. Or is it? Wait, Wellman probably made it up. It might be a word, maybe I'm just not looking hard enough. . .

In an April 1991 interview with *Performing Arts Journal's* Marc Robinson, Mac Wellman stated, “I have a tendency toward malapropism. I want to go with the wrong word and see where it takes me. I can always find the right one; they have computer programs to correct style now.”

Mac Wellman is a poet/playwright whose language is insulted by that very label: “language.” The very act of attempting to find a linear path in his writing style, or any structure really, is basically futile. This is because his sentences are not sentences. They are a string of indefinable images or feelings; anonymous blocks of air that visit his brain while he composes the musicality of a grammatically impossible phrase. When describing Wellman's writing style, I find myself endlessly putting quotes around words because what they truly mean is misrepresented by the simple organization of letters. The most mentally jolting aspect of getting to know Wellman's poetry is that while philosophical contradictions arise—why is he writing if the act of writing betrays his true thoughts? The elegant spontaneity and rough, staccato punch of his words are deeply effective to me as a reader and a listener.

At the beginning of my journey to comprehending Wellman, I felt that Mac Wellman was a condescending, intellectually obscure word-man. His intensely belligerent attitude isolated me as one who seeks to explain, translate and decipher a play's language. Then I realized that his plays are not meant to be understood as much as they are to be experienced. Wellman's characters do not make sense right away, nor do his words provide well-made answers or explanations. This is not their purpose. Wellman's plays are true examples of effective experiential learning. Simply experiencing his theatre begets dramatic success, Wellman-style.

Even though someone watching a Wellman play does not get up and join the actors in the action onstage, this poet's plays are strong advocates for audience participation. Wellman's plays plead for an active mind and spirit. It is true that his words can bite, but they can be deeply personal as well. When Wellman writes he is not betraying any law he has created for himself; he is sharing his metaphysical torment with anyone who is willing to really listen. Not hear—*listen*.

Wellman is fed up with the politically correct chains American tongues wear. He seeks to find new ways of expression that are not imprisoned by chronological structure and definition. His technique is a rebirth of human communication, an artistic medium that yearns to exist beyond the boredom of reality without losing coherence. The excitement of Wellman's linguistic revolution is palpable as I relax my explanatory tendencies and simply listen to the life-changing core of his poetry.

## Mac Wellman's Conflicting Emotions

In Mac Wellman's *A Murder of Crows*, one of the characters—Andy—is a golden statue decorating the lawn in front of his aunt's and uncle's house. Andy is Susannah's F-14 flying brother who died in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and "became beautiful in the war." When Wellman memorializes a deceased soldier of the Gulf War, he raises two questions concerning America's involvement in international affairs: What exactly are we remembering and why are we remembering this?

Although the Gulf War did not change the world dramatically, it definitely altered the world's view of America. In August of 1990 Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait and seized control of the country's oil supply. After four months of intense debating, American president George Bush decided to aid Kuwait's struggle for freedom. America quickly established its role as "the 911 of the world" by overwhelming Iraqi forces with superior military tactics and an innovative and relentless air force. American citizens had never had such great faith and pride in their nation's military.

Yet the soldiers returned to opposition at home as well. While Bush maintained that America's oil supply was threatened, as well as the stability of the Middle East, scores of Americans were opposed to the country's involvement in the Iraq/Kuwait conflict. Although the overpowering victory helped to destroy the stigma of Vietnam that had been weighing on the military for the past two decades, there were still people who were wary of America's venturing into foreign affairs. These citizens held the "it's not our problem" attitude, condemning America's overtly aggressive and nosy actions.

This is where Wellman's questioning kicks in. Why should America be so proud of this supposed triumph? Yes, "supposed" triumph. While America and its allies forced Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, the dangerous ruler was still in power. There was no definitive end to the Gulf War because the person who ignited the conflict maintained his position. President Bush's greatest success became his most intense concern. Yet, Americans persevered in their blind flag-waving.

Wellman taps into the controversial nature of American nationalism by creating Andy, the war memorial turned lawn ornament. Suddenly the accepted views of military idolatry are put into question. The playwright's harsh criticisms of American ideals might lead one to ask, "Does Wellman hate America?" Not necessarily.

This doubting of America and its attitude towards national values is bizarrely applicable to the country's current state of affairs. There are many similarities between the crisis in 1991 and the conflicts

with the terrorism of today. Yet there is one major difference: this time the war has hit home. There is no doubt that this fight is our fight and that the cause is much more personal. There were more mixed feelings concerning America's role in the Gulf War compared to the feelings about our current conflict with the Taliban—there is a much stronger advocacy of American participation. In the same way—in a superficial light—*A Murder of Crows* can be seen as a mere attack on the hypocrisy of America's value systems. Yet, the play is intensely personal as well. All is not lost: there is Susannah.

It is eerie how relevant Susannah's struggle is to today's want for the world to be peaceful again. Susannah is bored with the stagnant weather. She desperately yearns for change, a progression towards a stable enlightenment. Susannah can sense that "the world we think we know is about to undergo a terrible, cataclysmic transformation." Susannah is not blind like the rest of us. Our situation is not so hopeless.

Andy and Susannah, brother and sister, shed light onto what is perhaps Wellman's own conflict. In a February 1999 interview with *American Theatre's* David Savran, Wellman reveals a discovery he experienced concerning his writing. "Then I also found there was a spiritual dimension, a yearning that came through for a better America, for transcendence, a reaching for the stars even though you have your feet in clay. There was a political dimension that came up, too, a sense of betrayal." This emotional duality is evident when Wellman attacks America's distorted priorities and then reconciles them with Susannah's tendencies towards optimism. *A Murder of Crows*, with its attack on the falsity of America's true colors simultaneously existing with Susannah's aspirations for a "finer, harder, cleaner" state of being, is evidence that Wellman is truly what he terms "a cheerful pessimist."

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# 2001-02 Season Schedule

## Chicago Playworks 2001 - 2002 Season

### *Selkie*

by Laurie Brooks Gollobin  
directed by John Jenkins  
January 17 - March 16, 2002

Tuesdays at 10 a.m.: 1/22, 1/29, 2/5, 2/26, 3/12  
Thursdays at 10 a.m.: 1/17, 1/24, 1/31, 2/7, 2/14\*\*, 2/21, 2/28, 3/7, 3/14  
Saturdays at 2 p.m.: 1/19, 1/26, 2/16\* \*\*, 2/23, 3/2, 3/9, 3/16

### *The Selfish Giant and Other Wilde Tales* an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Complete Fairy Tales*

by Carolyn Hoerdemann  
World premiere  
directed by Ric Murphy  
April 2 - May 25, 2002

Tuesdays at 10 a.m.: 4/2, 4/9, 4/16, 4/30\*\*, 5/7, 5/14, 5/21  
Thursdays at 10 a.m.: 4/4, 4/11, 4/18, 5/2, 5/16, 5/23  
Saturdays at 2 p.m.: 4/20, 4/27\* \*\*, 5/18, 5/25

ALL DATES SUBJECT TO CHANGE

\*Ice Cream Social at Hilton Chicago and Towers after the play  
\*\* Interpreted in American Sign Language

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## The Theatre School Showcase 2001 - 2002 Season

### *A Murder of Crows*

by Mac Wellman  
directed by James Ostholthoff  
February 15 - 24, 2002 (previews 2/13 & 2/14)

### *Julius Caesar*

by William Shakespeare  
directed by Henry Godinez  
April 19 - 28, 2002 (previews 4/17 - 4/18)

Morning Matinees: Tuesday, 4/23/02\*\* & Thursday, 4/25/02\*\* at 10 a.m.  
\*\*Post-Show Discussions

### *The Real Thing*

by Tom Stoppard  
directed by Dexter Bullard  
May 17 - 26, 2002 (previews 5/15 & 5/16)

The second Sunday performance of each play is interpreted  
in American Sign Language.

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