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Under the Radar Screen

According to the literary Establishment, there is no such thing as a progressive culture in the United States. Maybe they're not looking in the right places.

Within every major city in the U.S. there are communities of cultural workers whose work never makes it onto the radar screen. It lurks somewhere just below the surface of recognition. Last summer I went to a book party for Robert Roth's *Health Proxy*. It was held at the Brecht Forum in Westbeth, a longtime artistic community on West Street, near the Hudson River in New York City. I was literally amazed by the number of people in the room who are in one way or another involved in the writing or producing of very critical works in the areas of visual art, music, literature and theatre. They present their work in unfashionable venues like bars and in small literary magazines. Their books are published by small presses. You can't even order most of their books on Amazon.com.

The Brecht Forum is a radical school for people who want to gain a better understanding of the way the world works. It does not issue college credits so people go to classes there after working a 9-5 job because they are actually interested in learning something that they don't already know. There is also a lecture series on local and global political issues at the Brecht Forum as well as events like the screening of new documentaries and book parties like the one I attended there last summer.

My friend, Eric Whellis and I had been reading Robert Roth's book *Health Proxy* and I had brought him to the book party to meet the author. While waiting for the reading of selections from the book to begin, Eric and I sat next to D. H. Melhem, an Upper West Side poet and novelist. She has published seven books of poetry, three novels and a critical study of Gwendolyn Brooks. Her latest book contains volumes two and three of her trilogy called *Patrimonies* and is entitled *Stigma* and *The Cave*. The first volume called *Blight* was published in 1995 and is in development as a movie. We had been communicating via email but this was our first face-to-face meeting. It was very hot in the room even though the air conditioner was on full blast. Soon there was little space to move to even say hello to people because of the number of bodies in the room.

Robert came over to me to introduce me to Joel Shatzky, whose science fiction novel, *Intelligent Design*, I had been reading. Joel had taught for many years up at SUNY/Cortland and also has a satirical novel called *Option Three*, which depicts what

would happen if corporations were to totally take over universities and buy up academic departments. The novel is patterned stylistically on *Catch 22*. In this novel, Shatzky imagines what would happen if a corporation were to buy an English Department at one of the SUNY campuses. Joel defines himself as a “radical pessimist.” Eric wondered if this is not one step away from being a Rightwing Republican. If you begin as a socialist and then move to being an anarchist and end up as a radical pessimist, you’ve got to wonder where the next step will lead. Joel’s a good guy so I don’t think he’ll end up as a neocon. He told Eric and me about his new play called “Orphans” which was soon to open in a small off-Broadway theatre on West 13th Street and asked us both to come to the opening night performance.

D. H. made her way back through the crowd and we talked for a while about her ideas as to how the journal I work on called *Socialism and Democracy* could publish poetry along with its more analytical essays on politics and culture. I had sent her a couple of back issues of the journal that she was currently reading, one of which has a translation of Brecht’s poem of the *Communist Manifesto*. I had been reading her *New York Poems* with great interest as well as her trilogy *Patrimonies*. Carletta Joy Walker, emcee for the evening, moved onto the stage in front of the room, so I could tell that the readings from *Health Proxy* were about to begin.

Roth stepped up to the microphone and introduced Ralph Nazareth, the publisher of Yuganta press and then began reading some of the more humorous sections from *Health Proxy*. The audience listened attentively. Between bursts of laughter and applause they urged him to read more. What struck me (and probably most of the other people) about his book is its astonishing honesty. His poet’s eye reveals his needs, flaws, his family relationships, his milieu of friends, and his broad, free-floating range of interests and perspectives. The Arts Editors from *The New York Times* should have been there. They might have seen a new literary movement in the making.

References:

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Socialism and Democracy: www.sdonline.org
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