

POETRY

Paying joyful homage to the polymath poet

For Rexroth: The Ark 14
 Edited by Geoffrey Gardner
 The Ark, Box 322, Times Square
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By Ray Olson

Kenneth Rexroth has an ability to recognize and appreciate beforehand the writers who come to be generally praised and awarded later. Many of these contribute to *For Rexroth*, among them Denise Levertov, Helen Adam, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Lenor Kandel, Ann Stanford and Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel winner whose translated *Selected Poems* Rexroth introduced on its first publication in 1973. Other contributors are more recent benefactors of Rexroth's critical encouragement who aren't yet well known: eminent Japanese, Latin American and Thai poets; some of the best gay poets; and several famous representatives of three generations of American poets.

Many are as well known for other accomplishments as for their poetry: Wendell Berry as the author of the eloquent polemic on American agriculture, *The Unsettling of America*; George Woodcock as the historian of *Anarchism, The Greeks in India and The Canadians*; James Broughton as a major and bacchanalian avant-garde filmmaker; Gerard Malanga as a superb portrait photographer; Jonathan Williams as the publisher of many of the handsomest books of the last quarter century under the Jargon Society imprint. Morris Graves, of course, isn't a literary man but an entrancing religious artist, this country's finest, and he contributes six drawings in Sumi ink on paper.

Variety.

I stress the variety of the contributors to what is a big book rather than just another issue of a literary magazine because it reflects the multi-facetedness, the cultural comprehensiveness of

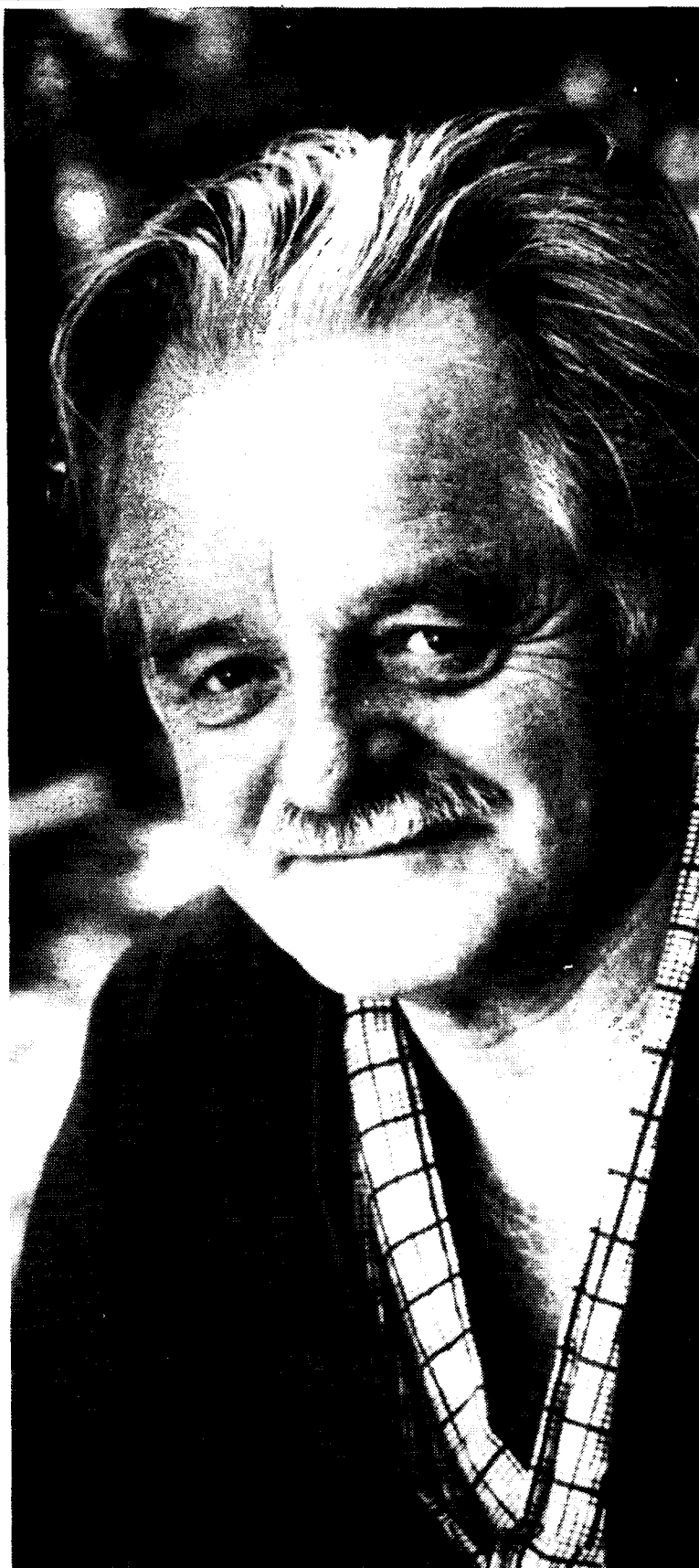
Kenneth Rexroth. A Wobbly and vital member of bohemian Chicago in his early youth; a wrangler and trail cook in the far West; a left activist in Depression California; a translator of Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and French poetry from adolescence on; a knowledgeable and accomplished painter; the vigorous promoter of both the anarchist/surrealist San Francisco poetic renaissance of the '40s and the Beats in the '50s; a trenchant and acute critic of American poetry and culture; the historian of *Communalism* from Wadi Qumran to the Hutterites—Rexroth has been a polymath in the variety of his interests. As importantly for his poetry, he has been a husband and father, and always a lover.

In the first section of this *fest-schrift* are memoirs, homages and analytical essays. Three of the best poets of their generation—John Haines, W.S. Merwin and the late James Wright—tell of the pleasure and encouragement Rexroth's work has given them. Elsa Gidlow, who writes that Rexroth "says I am his oldest living friend," and whose own work is at last receiving the broad recognition it deserves since her appearance in the gay documentary film *Word Is Out*, offers three pages of sharp-eyed "Random Memories" of Rexroth on his longtime home-ground, the San Francisco Bay area.

Another California neighbor, William Everson, complements Gidlow's pictures with the intellectual record: "His graphic imagination was on the wavelength of the future sexual liberation. Then too his pacifism and anarchism prefigured the anti-war and anti-establishment '60s, and helped bring them into being."

Rexroth's place.

Luis Ellicot Yglesias describes, with provocative contentiousness, Rexroth's place in post-war American poetry and names the effect to which Merwin, Wright, Haines and David Melt-



Kenneth Rexroth has been a Wobbly, a painter, a historian and always a lover.

zer testify in his title, "Kenneth Rexroth and the Breakthrough into Life." Kodama Sanekide explains succinctly some of the poet's Japanese devices in "Kenneth Rexroth and Japan," whetting the appetite for further translations of Kodama's work on the poet.

The third section, "For Rexroth," is the longest, more than twice as long as the rest of the book. Between it and the opening lie a set of poems by Rexroth's wife Carol Tinker, and

just before it, four poems in Rexroth's hand accompanied by—or perhaps accompanying—six drawings by Graves of little fish and a marine bird that make up an unfolding gestalt. The poems, two stories and one meditation—"On Religion and Space" by Czeslaw Milosz—of the final section comprise a fine anthology of contemporary serious writing. Its excellence evidences not only the contributors' respect for Rexroth but the editor's scrupulous good taste and

judgment as well.

Satire, polemic, elegy, homage, meditation, eroticism—at least all of these different modes of poetry are here. This profusion reflects that of Rexroth's 60 years of poetic activity. His great elegies for his mother Della echo in W.S. Merwin's "Sun and Rain." His recollection of a fellow radical, "For Eli Jacobsen," informs the reading of Marge Piercy's warm "In Memoriam Walter and Lillian Lowenfelds." Geoffrey Gardner's "Shutting a Book in the Woods," ending in a communion with his daughter, conjures Rexroth's similar meditations in the company of his daughters. Lenore Kandel's passionate "American Dreams" ("and the outlaw is America's hero...because too many men have sold out their manhood") is indisputably a sequel to the sharp cultural criticism of Rexroth's blasting lament for Dylan Thomas, "Thou Shalt Not Kill."

Eroticism.

Rexroth's greatness as an erotic poet of powerful sensuality and loving passion finds answer here many times, most often in the work of women. Yoshihara Sachiko's "Sundown" and Marcella Matthaei's "Momentarily across the black of your hair" evoke erotic longing of almost unbearable poignancy. Kerry Tomlinson's poem of love and memory, "photographer," does something with that hoary old taboo, parent-child eroticism. Irina Harford's "Bittersweet" is an astonishing sex poem, easily and happily eliciting shivering lust.

Two prose pieces are most memorable. Kathy Acker, whom Rexroth has called a prose poet of the death of capitalism, contributes the sixth chapter, "The Future," from her surrealist novel, *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. A contrapuntal exposition of the growth of economic imperialism and the passionate affair of streetpeople-artists Scott and Marcia, this is the kind of edgy, chance-taking writing that makes American literature a healthy ongoing concern. An older surrealist, Edouard Roditi of Rexroth's generation, provides in "News from the Ancient Sodomites" a jape at Biblical archaeology, UFOs, and incest with, I believe, a slight touch of Faulkner.

This is a book as worthy of Kenneth Rexroth as he is deserving of it.

Ray Olson works at the St. Paul Public Library.



Days: Construction

Days when the work does not end.
 When the bath at home is like
 cleaning another tool of the owner's.
 A tool which functions better with the dust gone from its pores.
 So that tomorrow the beads of sweat
 can break out again along trouser-legs and sleeves.

And then bed. Night. The framing continues
inside the head: hammers pound on
 through the resting brain. With each blow
 the nails sink in, inch by blasted inch.
 Now one bends, breaking the rhythm.
 Creaks as it's tugged free. A new spike
 is pounded in.

The ears ring with it. In the dark
 this is the room where construction is.
 Blow by blow, the studding goes up.
 The joists are levered into place.
 The hammers rise.

—Tom Wayman

Excerpted from *Introducing Tom Wayman: Selected Poems 1973-1980*, Persea Books (225 Lafayette St., New York City, NY 10012), \$5.95.

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

FILM

Playing the dozens for keeps



Sally rehearses her parole board speech.

By Tom Baglien

From the start *The Dozens*, a first feature film by Christine Dall and Randall Conrad, is revved up and running. Like its scrambling, lippy heroine, Sally Connors—a 21-year-old working-class woman busted for check forgery—the movie is tough-skinned and volatile, full of quick-cutting humor.

The title comes from a fast-talking game of rhymed insults, which originated in black culture and is played by prison inmates to blow off steam. Sally (Debra Margolies), a sharp-witted firebrand in pigtails, is a "dozens" expert. The game gets her in trouble with the prison matrons, who treat the women like bad little girls, and can only resort to the usual maternal clichés when the inmates misbehave. The game teaches Sally to think fast, to fight back and assert her independence.

These qualities, plus her hard-headed resolve, help Sally survive on the outside. Released from prison without the job skills or money to support herself or her four-year-old daughter Jessie, Sally faces an obstacle course made rougher by an overprotective mother, snobby parole officers, subtle sexism and an ex-husband (her partner in crime) she no longer loves. With the help of her best friend Russel (Marion Taylor, who co-authored the script), a resourceful ex-inmate who is a seamstress and beauty operator, Sally jumps from a menial factory job (stuffing paper in handbags) to beauty school.

Sonny (Edward Mason), Sally's estranged husband, is friendly and well-meaning but insensitive. He let Sally take the rap for forgery because he figured the courts would be easier on a woman. Now, he gives her some financial support (it makes him "feel like a man") in exchange for letting him package cocaine in her apartment. Sonny wants to go legit, to open a laundromat, but the only way he knows how to earn money is through crime. "It takes money to make money, right?" he asks Sally.

The movie was filmed in Boston's downtown "Combat Zone," a bleak urban landscape of freeways, grimy factories and ramshackle tenements, and inside the rainbow-painted hallways of Framingham State Prison.

Sally's narration ribs conventional, melodramatic moviemaking while capturing the tone of a woman hip to her own limitations. This woman's everyday

same indifference as the termination papers the boss shoves in her face. When the state legislature cuts off its funds, Sally is forced out of beauty school, into



Fellow inmates tell Sally's (Debra Margolies, lower right) fortune the night before she leaves prison.

struggle to be both a wage-earner and a loving mother is a practical lesson in the forces against personal liberation. The probation people rob Sally of her identity (she's routinely called "parolee"). She quits her factory job and is treated with the

debt and back under the thumb of Sonny's get-rich schemes. Sally is arrested again, but, ironically, not for her involvement with cocaine, but because her past (a forgotten check-stealing incident) catches up with her. Back in prison, she stitches

American flags together.

The directors have both had considerable experience producing documentaries, some shown on PBS. Dall just finished making two portraits in a series, *Women and Work*, about professional working women. *The Dozens* is an impressive feature film debut, roughly made but competent. It doesn't dig deep and sometimes it leaves personal relationships (Sally's casual lesbian affair in prison) vaguely underdeveloped. But it raises provocative questions about the problems and responsibilities working women face. The expert acting and the brisk efficiency, growly humor and off-handed tenderness of Dall and Conrad's

approach, all keep the movie fresh, unpredictable and absorbing.

Tom Baglien is a books editor in New York. *The Dozens* is distributed by First Run Features, 419 Park Ave., S., NYC 10016.

FILM CLIPS

Mon Oncle d'Amerique (New World Pictures). Alain (Night and Fog, Hiroshima, Mon Amour) Resnais' new film alternates the results of studies of rats under stress—which leads to frustration, aggression and, if

aggression is prohibited, self-destructiveness—with the story of several modern middle-class lives. Intertwined, they reveal aggression, self-destruction... and, if only partially, redemption. The Skinnerian dicta are cheap and dispensable, but the drama of daily lives is a brilliant study of the thwarting of emotional life. Every social epoch has different ways to pay the price of living in relation with—and therefore in frustration with—other people. The news is not the existence of frustration, but its expression among us—for instance, ways people perceive the emotional cost of living as avoidable, and the way pain becomes an accidental and ignorable by-product of other processes, like plant shutdowns.

Resnais does that in his precisely-detailed storytelling. The style is clipped, dry, thoughtful and slightly distanced. Bold montage provokes thought. The opening 20 minutes are breathless in their rapid-fire dispensing of information about the characters' past, impudently juxtaposed with the scientist's rat data. The characters—an actress-turned-consultant (Nicole Garcia), a good-willed textile factory manager (Gerard Depardieu) and an ambitious politician (Roger-Pierre) make their Everymanish situa-

tions sharp and individual. Their crises—an affair, an endangered job, slipping out of favor—are vivid, and their responses are much more interesting than are the rats'. We follow them the way we do a troubled co-worker or a relative, with sympathy and curiosity. The decision to market this intellectual, stylized essay as a comedy was a mistake. The reviews praising its humor are



Gerard Depardieu asks God to save his job.

more baffling. Wit and grace and courage it has, but *La Cage aux Folles* it is not. Did reviewers see the movie or the trailer? PA

Thief (United Artists). This film is violent, not nearly as much in its action as in its atmosphere. It captures the violence of daily urban life—the traffic, the noise, the pushing and shoving, the frustration of being patronized

and bossed—with peculiar force. It can give suburban streets the evil feel of a drive around town with *Taxi Driver*. James Caan plays a freelance thief, an artist in his work, forced to work for the mob's Godfatherish head. He gets sucked in for a familiar reason: hunger for a family. Because this is a story about what Raymond Chandler called "the dark side of the silver dollar," everything is bolder, more schematic, even more senseless than in, say, white collar work. He appropriates a wife (Tuesday Weld), house and kid with the same brutal efficiency that he cracks open bank safes. He loses it all, but not before he has turned frustration into self-destruction and mayhem.

The theme of the proletarianization of thievery is not just bold, but pretentious—especially so since the movie maintains a single, glorifying focus on the thief. Weld and supporting actors Willie Nelson (father figure) and Jim Belushi (sidekick) are underused talents as a result, and the self-pity gets thick enough to cut and serve. But the delicious cheap thrills of Tangerine Dream's ominous music, the urban cacophony of the sound effects, the macho alienation of Caan's acting and the stylized violence of Chicago's night and industrial landscapes all go together. It works. *Thief* is a potent, if not profound, addition to our popular works on American criminality as American life. PA

Contributor: Pat Aufderheide

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