



Rinde Eckert. Photo:
Michelle Clement.

IDIOTS' PARADISE

Rinde Eckert, Interviewed by Tom Sellar

TOM SELLAR *Your work reflects an astonishing range of influences—not just musical, but also literary and theatrical. Is this breadth self-conscious or instinctual for you?*

RINDE ECKERT A little of both, I think. My parents were both classical singers. I was exposed to opera at an early age. I heard German lieder and Italian art songs from day one. My father has a master's degree in English literature and an interest in history. My mother is well spoken and well read. I've always thought of her as a closet philosopher. We had a lot of books. My parents both have great senses of humor. I came of age in the sixties, aware of politics, suspicious of received opinion, and listening to the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix. I had a standard liberal-arts education. I sang in madrigal groups, barbershop quartets, musical comedies, operas, and new music ensembles. I wrote and performed folk songs, took t'ai chi and aikido, formed an improvisational dance group, acted in straight plays, read Thucydides, the Bhagavad Gita, Pogo, Donne, William Carlos Williams, Pablo Neruda, saw *King Lear*, *The Caretaker*, *The Visit*, *Rules of the Game*, and *Ben Hur*. I played one Benny Goodman record so much I wore it out, and did the same with sides two and five of *Turandot* and Brahms's violin concerto. I struggled to master vocal technique, loved and lost, loved and won, and asked myself searching questions all the time. In short, I had a normal American upbringing.

Basically, I see eclecticism as a point of departure, as a fact of modern existence. We

can't avoid it without taking extraordinary steps to shelter ourselves. We're confronted on a daily basis with a kind of surreal abundance of cultural influences. The key to successful management in this bewildering complex is the refinement of one's questions. So the instinct is toward the eclectic because that is the nature of experience, but the nature of one's questions is self-conscious. My questions are large and serious, so I need history, literature, and the wisdom of those who have gone before. My questions are not the same as those of my predecessors, so I don't trust the conventional answers.

How does one find classical rigor and purpose in eclecticism?

One asserts it as an aspiration, I suppose. Then one hopes for the best. I don't want to recover classicism as a nostalgic adventure; I want to recover it as my authentic voice. I want to move past the glib and sensational into what my Idiot calls a place where they "might embrace me on the edge of town, me in my rugged careworn suit, and they might say, 'Do you know your name, or should we go ahead and tell you without any more folderol so you can take your place among us and sing in common the song of your village?'"

Does solo performance offer more opportunity for meaningful contexts than other forms of theater?

One of the reasons I've done so much solo work is that it's very easy to emend the dimensions of an idea coherently. When it's just myself, I

can wander through any number of different avenues of approach: poetry, song, story, or dance. It gets more complicated when you add people. Form is intrinsic in number, in a sense. You get two people on stage and your mind can't travel in odd ways without asking, "Where are they standing if they talk to each other this way? What do they mean?" All of a sudden you have a *society* and as a result you have demands made on you.

How did you move from studying classical voice to creating theater pieces as an actor, director, and playwright-librettist?

By default. I found myself in some avant-garde theater pieces in the early 1980s, as part of George Coates's Performance Works. I started writing scenes with the composer Paul Dresher, who was writing music for the company. Paul and I both felt limited in this little group. We wanted to move into language and build meaningful characters. I had kept a notebook when we toured Europe in the early 1980s, and when Paul and I were traveling together, I would read it to him. He invited me to come down to his basement studio to show me some music he'd written, and he said, "Bring your notebook." I showed him "Clever Boy Sleeping with the Light On," which became the central piece in a work called *Slow Fire*. *Slow Fire* started out as a one-act opera performed at New Music America in Los Angeles in 1984, and it was immediately embraced as something special, so we created a second act.

Margaret Jenkins and some of her dancers had seen *Slow Fire*, and she asked me to write a text for her. The project was called *Shelf Life*, and it turned out really well. Gradually more and more people wanted to work with me, and so I began to establish myself in San Francisco. I would find myself directing dancers who suddenly needed a score but didn't have any money left for a composer. So I would say, "Well, I have a music background—why don't I

do the score?" Eventually I was writing, directing, composing, and performing with equal regularity. People who saw my work responded strongly to it, and as a result I've just continued to do it. I moved to New York in 1994, after my wife Ellen McLaughlin finished performing in *Angels in America*, and here I am.

What is the place of new music-theater in music institutions and theaters today?

It's marginal. For the mainstream music-theater producer there's no money in it. It's too gnarly and serious for the *Lion King* crowd. The classical music world's organizations are essentially museums for nineteenth-century, and sometimes eighteenth-century, work. The university system has developed as an apprenticeship program for aspiring opera singers. The operatic repertoire has been collected over the past two or three hundred years, and companies don't have enough seasons even to honor that repertoire. However, they continue to eat up all the funding, and the universities are all geared toward supplying such institutions with new singers. So where do you house a new project?

Is there a solution to this problem?

Institutions that have built up a legacy of erudition are problematic. They approach art as if performances are simply realizations of pieces of literature, as if a play was written first and foremost as literature. Of course that is not how I imagine Shakespeare working. I imagine his plays were created in situ. People were probably improvising, people were probably fucking up their lines, and he was probably taking it all in. He probably showed up unprepared, or with a sketchy idea for them to improvise around. Actors were probably complaining, "I just hate saying that," and he had to convince them or rewrite it. That's been my experience in the theater. The trouble with the art-as-museum approach is that it becomes a self-authorizing aesthetic blind to new beauties. So the Bach af-

cionado can't stand Jimi Hendrix and barely tolerates Mozart, the Shakespeare scholar sighs, "Alas, our barren age," and the ballet master insists on speaking English badly to his anorexic charges. The museum mind looks at new art and sees what it isn't, not what it is.

How do music-theater artists develop without an institutional home in that case? Or do they need one?

No, I don't think they need an institutional framework. But they do need to recognize the value of technique—and this is one thing musical institutions are actually right about. Technique gives you things that you can't get any other way. I've been able to do what I've done because I have some foundation in technique.

What kind of training did you have?

It was classical vocal training. I studied with great teachers, and as a result I have technical capabilities that even the strictest classical musician should recognize. As I said, my parents were singers. As a result I haven't been overawed by classical music. I listen to the Verdi *Requiem* and feel as ecstatic as anybody with any sense. I know that rapture; I've sung it, I've been there, I feel it, too. The difference is that I also feel this other excitement around something else. Why limit ourselves to the traditional, gorgeous as it is?

I keep thinking these institutions will suddenly wake up and admit that. But they don't want new art, they basically want new Renaissance paintings or romantic operas—and what's wrong with that? Just don't bother calling it contemporary work. Call it nouveau Renaissance, or neo-Verdian. Large opera companies, for instance, could make some small gesture, but they won't. Why not put a little box in the corner of the program titled "For the Adventurous Souls"? It could mention whatever production and say that it's happening Monday through Thursday, at the black

box theater down the street, and it calls itself an opera and it might be worth checking out. That's it. Just an acknowledgment that maybe there are other forms of this art, innovative forms of music-theater that might be sophisticated and effective. But they won't do it. Why it's so threatening I have no idea.

Do you see any shared sensibility among artists creating new music-theater today? Similar impulses?

I don't think desires have changed much. People are still trying to tell stories or trying to jostle, provoke, move, engage, or alienate the audience in some way. But what has changed in recent years is the rapid development and proliferation of new media and their by-products. These technologies have made all our lives easier; they've given us many great new options, but they haven't changed the stage work that much.

Some art ends up fetishizing such technology on stage, embracing dehumanization. What artist wants to be part of that?

I've gone into museums to look at video art, and my eyes drop down and underneath it says: "Sony." *Sony?* This is not a neutral value here, this has resonance. Am I supposed to ignore this? It's like putting a hot dog vendor in the middle of your show and then saying, "Please just ignore the hot dog vendor. He's just selling hot dogs. It has nothing to do with the play." But I can't help looking at him, because he's *there*. We've taken a grotesque industrial value with physical, emotional, and political resonance, and we willfully ignore it.

I suppose the proscenium is an imposed limitation, but its dimensions were not determined by multinational corporate consensus. With television you never change your field of vision, and as a result everything is symmetrical and flat. And, as a result, one isn't engaged in the same way. I guess I prefer volume, space, distance, weight, and height, so I gravitate to the theater.

Do you consider your pieces political?

In my own work I've found an ongoing series of questions that keep rearticulating themselves, and that give me a sense of belonging to a larger framework of questions about religion and politics, though I'm more interested in general political philosophy than in specific political questions. I don't consider my work "topical."

Can you describe how such questions are raised in one of your pieces?

The Idiot Variations is an example of what I would call my political writing. For instance, in the speaker's description of his hand there is an allegory. The thumb as brutish proletariat; the index finger as the opinionated lawmakers; the middle finger as the moneyed interests; the fourth as simple followers, the bourgeoisie; and the pinky as intellectuals. Tie political will and money together in the index and middle fingers, and, the Idiot says, "they'll dominate the thumb and control the hand." He slips a glass bottleneck over his pinky, saying, "Slip a straightjacket over the smallest finger (the curious and smart, the intellectuals) and the hand loses its ability to grasp. Make a fist of all these idiots and you got yourself either a coherent community or a weapon of destruction."

The Idiot's rage at the world outside is very palpable in performance. Did you work with a director?

I worked with two old friends. Lee Townsend helped me put the music together and Robert Woodruff put me through my paces on the boards. Initially I wanted to do the whole piece without any words, and so I'd improvise, and we would choose from the improvisations. One night Robert set me a task: I had to improvise for two hours, and I wasn't allowed to stop until the time was up. I got so angry by the end of the two hours that I couldn't continue, and it revealed a side of this piece that I hadn't really considered, and that's the anger of this figure as

he grows aware of himself within a political landscape and gradually realizes his powerlessness. The movement started to get tortuous and graceful at the same time, as if the character's body was an extension of the instruments on stage. The weight of the accordion dictates a certain kind of posture, and we would sculpt that image, just as the guitar and later the baritone suggested something else. Robert was a facilitator; I would work with these things and then he would say, "There, that's it." I needed an outside eye, and his was particularly good.

Is your music for Idiot Variations similar to previous pieces?

I'd been using words a lot in previous pieces, and I really wanted to do a heavily musical piece. I tried to cut down on words and get at certain kinds of music that I wasn't able to previously. I'd been working with heavily amplified music of a minimalist cast, some on my own, and some Paul Dresher's, with whom I have a long artistic relationship. Paul and I had done wonderful music-theater together, but still I found myself hungering for a new task, a different challenge for the voice, to create subtle and unusual colors acoustically, without processing, and rhythm that had the pace and feel of breathing.

Where did you get the idea for the village idiot who is the main character?

There was a street singer in Seattle who was very bad, but he always wore a bow tie and a plaid shirt. He was completely insane, but he knew every show tune that had ever been written. You could yell out any tune and he knew it. He was a kind of idiot savant, and I started doing a little research on idiots savants and how the brain works, the borderlines between genius and idiocy. There are documented cases of people with extraordinary mathematical ability who can't tie their shoes. There was a man who could play on the piano anything he heard on

the radio but had the intellect of a two-year-old. I became fascinated with this idea, and it's been a recurring theme in a lot of my work.

There's a personal story behind it, too. When I was growing up, my father often called me an idiot. He didn't realize it, but he did it often. Sometimes, when he was angry at me, he would do it in Italian, which translated into calling me "a simple sausage." He has since apologized to me for all his mistakes, but at the time I thought that I was in fact an idiot. When I was in the seventh grade, I finally decided I had to do something about my terrible problem, and I enrolled myself in remedial reading, because I was sure I wasn't reading fast enough. They threw me out of the class; I was getting straight A's in school but I thought I was an idiot.

So I invented a myth for myself: that although I was in fact an idiot, I was a genius idiot who could fool everybody into believing that I could do things. I was able to get good grades and win awards with my great secret. It was a good way to work against the logic that had been implanted. Even now, whenever I make a mistake I immediately go to that place: the little boy responding to his dad, who is really pissed off that he doesn't know what he's supposed to know, which is basically everything.

By the way, my father is now one of my strongest supporters. He was a classical tenor for many years, and I would often listen to him sing solos in operas, concerts, or church. He had several opportunities that didn't pan out, but he always sang beautifully and with enormous soul. I remember hearing him do Mahler's Eighth and it was just fantastic; he must have been sixty at the time.

What about the Idiot in your play? What happens to him?

The character goes from station to station, instrument to instrument, in the sequence referred to in the script: north, south, east, and west. The drum is the last, and he approaches it about three times before he's able to actually

play it. It's the most political of the instruments, being a Boy Scout drum, and so he talks about the militancy of that image, how the Scouts follow their leader through the woods like a line of ducks. But he gets caught in it and plays this rhythm which becomes like Hitler giving a speech in this dictatorial voice; finally he gets alarmed at himself. The Idiot becomes alarmed at his own drama, dropping his drum and running about the stage trying to find some way out—but he can't. The piece starts with a glib, almost operatic, slide-whistle aria, and as the piece progresses, there's a burgeoning awareness that idiocy has its cost, that the village idiot is *not* free. In the beginning he's just in his own world and it's wonderful; but eventually that world has to come to terms with another, larger world, and that's the problem. At the end he sits, backed up against the wall, in a heap. He makes a remark about "the ceremony of innocence," which comes from Yeats's famous poem "The Second Coming":

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the
worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Why does the character speak in an Irish accent? Is this an ironic comment on the Idiot's mysticism?

It's not a very good accent; as the Idiot says: "Some half-remembered voice of a poet, I suppose." A combination of Beckett, Joyce, Brendan Behan, and various others. I needed a way of speaking that would place him outside American culture and, at the same time, within it. I wanted, also, to encourage a different reading of the word *idiot*, a more inflected understanding of it.

The musical interludes between the monologues communicate so much of the intensity of the character's innermost feelings, and they draw on many

different kinds of music as his mood changes. At one point the singing seems to draw on Indian vocal forms.

Yes, I used to get together with a composer who had studied with Ali Akbar Khan, and we would just sing together, almost every morning for a while. In India, you learn by just singing back to the teacher. It's an incredibly nuanced art form. I'm not an adept, but I can hint at it. It's hinted at in this piece before turning into the blues. I was fascinated by the musical similarities, especially considering the cultural disparity.

You developed Romeo Sierra Tango with the New York Shakespeare Festival. How did the project originate, and why did you choose to use Romeo and Juliet as a source and subject?

George Wolfe asked me if I would like to do a new piece about Shakespeare, and I had never approached Shakespeare except as an actor. George said, "What would happen if you took a minor character from any one of Shakespeare's plays and rewrote it based on the minor character's perceptions of what was going on?" I started going through all the plays and reread *Romeo and Juliet*, and I was surprised at my reaction. I was asking critical questions I had never asked before of the play. Why does Shakespeare compromise his protagonist in so many ways? Romeo is so fickle if you think about it. First he's desperate over Rosaline and then suddenly over Juliet. I started examining his responses to his friends as well, and I couldn't get rid of this disturbing image of Romeo as a kind of naive solipsist. As I read the piece, everything he said, everything he did, confirmed this impression more and more. He was totally self-centered; he betrays everyone in the piece at one time or another.

That's when I started to think I could do something with this character. The received wisdom is that Romeo is to be excused all of this for love, which we take to be real love. But what

if it isn't? If Romeo hadn't been so busy enjoying his own grief, he could have seen that Juliet—who Shakespeare depicts as sober, intelligent, and noble—was coming alive. But he can't see anything; he is this proud tower of romantic mythology, overawed by his own grief.

What about your Romeo? He has been traveling through the centuries since the events of Shakespeare's play—has he learned anything?

The piece is about the awakening of self-awareness. Romeo is now intensely critical of his own behavior, and he's suicidal as a result. I wanted to wake him up from this jejune stupor and educate him. It's a painful self-awareness, but it's preferable to the metaphorical blindness in which he lived before. I didn't want him to die a tragic fool, which is what he does in the play; he knows nothing when he dies in the original play. It's his lack of self-awareness that makes Romeo's death so tragic. The twentieth century is nothing if it isn't about the awakening of an irony fundamental to all these notions of duty and romance, forced on us by the tragic character of our century. It's an appalling century, with millions of people killed for warped ideals, and there's no way to avoid it.

Your Romeo contemplates these betrayals of "duty" as well as his own betrayals in the original story.

Yes. Centuries later, Romeo is still rehearsing the play over and over again, out of necessity. The play has become his mantra, and we catch up with him in World War I, just before the Versailles Treaty, which will be the great betrayal that starts the twentieth century, ultimately leading to the rise of Hitler's fascism and World War II. World War I is where our ironic position to duty may have begun. How can we believe in such a thing when wars like this result? Yet people still want to get back to some more naive forms of idealism, which isn't possible now and is absolutely dangerous. This is

exactly what creates a Hitler or a Stalin; the possibility of a romantic mythology coupled with the military engines of the twentieth century. Romantic mythology is too dangerous; in this version Romeo is therefore no longer just some infatuated kid—he's very, very dangerous.

Romeo is stuck at a particular historical juncture. What drew or draws you to that era?

Once again he's caught between the warring houses. This is like a grand cartoon of the feud between families that started in Verona, this impossible axis. So it was the perfect place to stage his final death. What I love about the piece is that although Romeo is fated to die, he isn't let off the hook. He doesn't become a kinder, wiser person. All I've done is to extend Shakespeare's play; Romeo keeps on rehearsing and rehearsing until finally its dimensions make sense to him, and he sees beyond himself—to Juliet, ultimately. He is liberated and dies.

How did you use music to evoke these Elizabethan and modern worlds?

I use about five different pieces of music in the production, but surprisingly they are all done with two drums. I found that I needed to honor the solemnity of the setting and couldn't risk bringing in the bells and whistles. Drums belong to that world, field drums and so forth, which I use in slightly different ways. On one occasion I provide the beat and sing a kind of blues song. In the beginning there's a wailing, a cry of awakening as this mud-covered, naked man rises up out of the mud, bayonet in hand, to start another day. The cry is a lament that he *hasn't* been killed; he's awakened in a bomb crater, where he was left for dead, but must wake up once again. He stands there like a modern banshee. Then, after a Butoh-like movement sequence, he turns to the audience and says, "Ah! Another day," with a stiff-jawed New England phrasing. Welcome to the twentieth century.

Is Beckett an influence for you?

Yes, very much so.

Did you use Elizabethan music or rhythms?

I wanted to, but in rehearsal every allusion to that world violated the austerity of the setting. I was enjoying the silences so much and treating the words themselves as musical. I wanted the language to honor the musicality of Shakespeare. This shift away from using vernacular language has opened up some new possibilities for me; the most recent piece I did in Iowa, called *A Tale We Told the Queen on the Evening of the Fourth Day of Our Journey to the East*, uses high syntax almost exclusively, and I only used the vernacular at specific points.

Do you set out to relate the old and the new in your work self-consciously?

New theater work is born out of the artist's love for a certain quality of being, a certain energy, which we have seen released on the stage at some point in our lives. I'm still trying to recreate a feeling I had when I was nine years old, and my parents took me to see *The Visit* with the Lunts. I watched Lynn Fontanne stand there, barely moving but completely electric, and I was staggered. It wasn't outrageously avant-garde, but it was so moving. I also cried when I went to *La Bohème* as a five-year-old and Mimi died; also, when I saw my dad as Faust being dragged away by the devil.

So I'm not just interested in having an oppositional frame of reference. It's funny, when I perform in Europe now, people recognize me from a video piece of Bruce Nauman's, in which I appear, called *Anthro/Socio*. Bruce is so iconoclastic and severe in his opposition to stylistic predilections. So the Naumanites assume that I too am hostile to anything conventional, and they interpret every vigorous gesture I make as anger, every irony as defiance. I would love to see a healthier dialogue about

these divisions in our aesthetic outlook: “conventional” vs. “avant-garde.” What does that really mean?

Your work frequently explores what has been lost in or from the past, and how that colors the present. For instance, in the final scene of The Gardening of Thomas D., we discover that the mound in the backyard—where Thomas has been feverishly meditating on contemporary life—actually belongs to his grandfather and was Thomas’s favorite childhood spot.

I think it’s less about recovering what’s been lost as understanding how to be lost. Sometimes people ask me what I want my audience to come away with, and I usually say that I want my audience to feel lost, but not so lost that they panic. I want them to recognize that they aren’t on the path, and then proceed in their lives, not by falling down and crying, but by taking a hard look at where we are.

Often you use humor to deflect despair when it’s encroaching in the pieces. In The Gardening of Thomas D., for instance, Thomas ends his speech about the possibility of annihilation, ignorance, fear, and longing by interjecting, “I hate shopping here—the lights are glaring, and you can’t get out the same way you got in.”

Nothing like a good pratfall to keep things in perspective. As the author playing a character in his own drama, I’m in a strange and unique position. But it’s also a very common dilemma. We all feel like that. To betray the authority in the work is to remind the audience they’re free.

Is this related to those moments when Thomas tries to make speeches on sand buckets or with bullhorns?

Yes. The work reflects the process in that if Thomas is talking about redemption, then the poet behind Thomas is working at something similar. I’m present in my work perhaps in the same way Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton

are present in their characters: we accept that both actor and character are present, even though we don’t mistake one for the other. Few people have ever commented on this aspect of the work, which I guess is an indication of success. There is a self-reference, but I also take positions, make large emotional statements, make claims for a character, and attempt to live at least in part through that character. As a result, I lose the cool ease of the ironic witness that is so emblematic of a lot of solo performance work.

The title sounds like Kafka—The Gardening of Thomas D.—as if this will be a fable about the cataclysm of modern identity. Is this intentional?

Definitely. It’s always ominous when a character’s name is abbreviated. They do that in some pulp mystery stories, and I like the sense that this is a little bit tabloid in that way. At the same time, I wanted a subliminal reference to Dante because I use key structural elements from the *Divine Comedy*. There are three big Thomases important to the formation of the piece: Thomas Aquinas, doubting Thomas, and Thomas Merton. What’s strange about the title, although I didn’t realize it when I wrote it, is that my grandfather’s name was Thomas D. Rinde; I was given my mother’s maiden name as a first name. So by some torturous logic I actually arrived at my grandfather’s name. In fact he was a minister as well.

How does the music correspond to these different aspects of the piece: autobiography and Dante?

The music is related to medieval music, some of it liturgical. I borrowed heavily from a particular mass by Machaut in the general sonorities, nothing specific. It starts with chanting from offstage, almost like Gregorian chant, as if the monks are beginning vespers.

The stage directions suggest that the monks may actually be getting ready for baseball practice. How

did you make the connection between Dante and baseball?

I met A. Bartlett Giamatti when he was a Dante scholar—before he became baseball commissioner—and he had written a book about baseball called *Take Time out for Paradise*, and I thought, “This is perfect.” Baseball is a pastoral game, and the whole object is to go to three bases and then go home. You start at home, and then you leave and return home. First base, second base, and third base are like this planetary, cosmological model. The setting appealed to me for that reason—it consists of tiered bleachers that you could either descend or climb up. And they’re falling apart, with loose boards. This mimics Dante’s scheme as well.

In the piece, the monks can’t field a team anymore—you need nine people, and there’s not enough of them left. Of course, Dante was also concerned with the breakdown of the Catholic hierarchy and what he saw as the secularist politics that was invading the church. He wanted to make a very distinct division between what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. The Catholic Church was bolstering itself with nepotism and political machinations and indulgences, which Dante saw as tremendously destructive, and which turned out to be a personal tragedy for him as well. He found himself in a kind of limbo as his world gradually came to an end.

Perhaps like Dante, Thomas turns to paradise because of a personal tragedy and recalls his grandfather’s words:

*Remember that, Son, he said
Paradise is not some manicured lawn
but a great spilling
a great mysterious spilling
not the measured paths of some formal
garden
but a meandering tunnel through some
mysterious tangle of roots and
worms.*

My ending gives paradise very short shrift. The *Paradiso* is so doctrinaire, and I’ve never found the image of an ordered heaven to be very credible. So I create a heaven that is a disordered place, the grandfather’s seemingly mundane depiction of paradise as a place with worms, complicated soil.

Many of your characters discover a similar kind of paradise, and most of them are loners, outsiders, or eccentrics. Do you see a connection between the main characters in The Idiot Variations, Romeo Sierra Tango, and The Gardening of Thomas D.?

In all three cases, I’m looking for a purchase on modern culture by getting outside of it. If you’re standing within the culture, it’s hard to get a handle on it. But by stepping outside, by putting my characters in these antique situations, by placing them back in history—yet also in the present—I can approach it. For instance, Thomas D. is in a monastery, but it’s in New Jersey, and he’s actually on a baseball field outside the monastery. The Idiot is a village idiot who has lost his village, and he’s an idiot, so he might be standing in the middle of it. And Romeo, though his whole life has been devoted to explaining Verona and the play and the period, finds himself in the middle of World War I. I love these juxtapositions. I find them humorous and deeply illuminating at the same time, and I’m trying to make a case for the grandeur of irony. I’m disturbed when people refer to irony in the same breath as cynicism and fatalism. I see such things as subordinate to irony, and irony itself as the sine qua non of intelligence. My characters, like Romeo, are after something they’ve lost, but they’re not confused by their sentiments. They feel loss and regret, but it doesn’t dissuade them from exercising their heads. That’s what I try to do: move away from the glib and the vernacular into the timeless. Music helps me do that; the way it works on us can’t be explained, nor do we expect it to be explained, which is wonderful.