

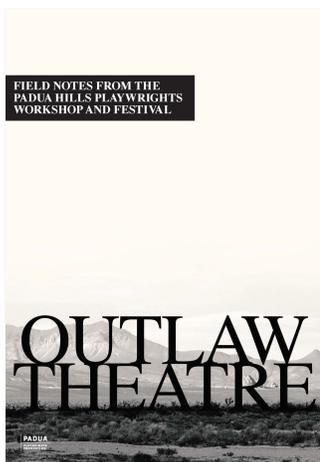
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# Off-Off-Broadway West: On Guy Zimmerman's "Outlaw Theatre"

July 3, 2023 • By Paul Vangelisti

## *Paul Vangelisti*

Paul Vangelisti is an American poet, translator, and editor, and the Founding Chair of the Graduate Writing program at Otis College of Art and Design. His many works of poetry include *Motive and Opportunity* (Shearsman Books, 2020), *Border Music* (Talisman House,



Outlaw Theatre:  
Field Notes from the  
Padua Hills  
Playwrights  
Workshop and  
Festival

GUY ZIMMERMAN

NOSTALGIA AND ITS PERILS aside—the latter including, more often than not, becoming repetitious and shamelessly preaching to the choir—one might argue that, in the 1970s and '80s, Los Angeles became one of the country's most vital centers for equity-waiver theater. Eastside, Westside, Valley, Downtown—theater was burgeoning in almost every part of Los Angeles, with far too many venues to enumerate.

Despite the long-standing excellence of a site such as the Pasadena Playhouse, [this year's recipient](#) of the Tony Regional Theatre Award, the legacy of equity-waiver theater has been mostly overlooked. (Regional theater itself is/was a term reserved for places like Louisville or La Jolla—i.e., anywhere outside of New York.) This is especially relevant when considering a collection of essays like Guy Zimmerman's *Outlaw Theatre: Field Notes from the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop and Festival*, published last fall, which examines a time when our city's

2016), *Days Shadows Pass* (Green Integer, 2007), and *Embarrassment of Survival: Selected Poems 1970-2000* (2001). As Cultural Affairs Director for the Los Angeles radio station KPFK, he produced "Los Angeles Theater of the Ear," which featured poetry readings by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Amiri Baraka, Kenneth Patchen, and others. He is the editor of a number of collections, including *Anthology of L.A. Poets* (1972), with Charles Bukowski and Neeli Cherkovski, and *L.A. Exile: A Guide to Los Angeles Writing 1932-1998* (Marsilio, 1999), with Evan Calbi. He has received numerous awards for his translations from Italian, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Italy's Flaiano Prize, the Raiziss/de Palchi Book Prize from the Academy of American Poets, and the PEN USA Prize for Translation.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

artistic development was less addicted to the delirious pragmatism that has overtaken us today. For a generation or so, the Hollywood dream factory was lagging and couldn't fill its quotas.

Given what was, at that time, the most liberal equity-waiver contract in the country under its 99-seat exemption (the maximum number of seats in a venue where Actors' Equity union members might perform without pay), the L.A. theater scene would proliferate from 1975–85, **growing** "from 42 [waiver houses] in 1980 to an estimated 130 in 1985." At the heart of a highly eclectic creative community, actors worked in TV and movies by day, then developed their craft during the evening hours and weekends on the stages of independent (often precariously surviving) theaters. For those in exile from experimental theater centers like New York or San Francisco, Los Angeles, in editor Zimmerman's appraisal, presented a "surprisingly hospitable alternative." In addition to the lax Actors' Equity rules, Zimmerman notes that "low rents in various pockets of the vast suburban sprawl" and "the world's largest population of gifted and underemployed actors" compensated for the absence of a seasoned theater audience, especially given the workshop approach of these New York exiles and their Off-Off-Broadway experimentalism.

As might be expected in these recollections, the writing in *Outlaw Theatre* is essentially performative; even the book's organization enacts what it's discussing. The volume is presented in five sections—"Earth," "Water," "Fire," "Air,"

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## RECOMMENDED

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### Copiously: On Dolores Dorantes's "Copy" and Kyle Harvey's "Cosmographies"

Paul Vangelisti appreciates the poetic voyages in Kyle Harvey's "Cosmographies" and Dolores Dorantes's "Copy," translated by Robin Myers....

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### The Method Is the Main Character: A Conversation with

and “Void”—and its contents, in keeping with the sometimes raucous vitality and do-it-yourself nature of this type of avant-garde theater, bear the subtitle “field notes”—that is, observations gleaned from the on-site experience of doing theater and theater workshops over an 18-year span. The editor notes: “The iconoclastic nature of the Padua aesthetic has made organizing the essays in this collection especially challenging.” In fact, the five sections listed above embody the editor’s attempt to classify the chaos that, by all accounts, was Padua Hills. Or, in Zimmerman’s words, “I’m hoping the full, renegade cultural machine that was the Padua Hills Festival and Workshop will emerge from these assorted reflections.” And it certainly does. It’s a tribute to the editing of *Outlaw Theatre* that the volume coheres so well while telling the various participants’ sometimes extravagant stories.

Like the Padua Hills artistic director Murray Mednick, many of the principals involved in this experiment were veterans of the Off-Off-Broadway scene. As may be seen in these essays, the Off-Off here, in the hills above Claremont, would thrive for almost two decades and evolve into a new form. In the book’s introduction, entitled “The High Western Window,” Zimmerman defines the project: “[T]he festival outfitted three generations of young American playwrights in the fine art of causing trouble onstage.”

The Off-Off phenomenon or movement, if one may call it that, intended nothing less than to restore the primacy of

## Isaac Butler

Lauren Goldenberg talks with Isaac Butler about his new book, “The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act.”...

## Gritty and Glittery

A juicy, jaunty book about Broadway in the 1990s....

## Letter from New York: The Dope on How We Cope, or, The Theater Cure

Laurie Winer reviews several plays currently on Broadway, including “Hadestown,” “To Kill a Mockingbird,” and “My Fair Lady.”...

## Acting and Impersonation

language to theater—what Mednick, in his “Notes on Theatre,” calls “letting the text be first.” As Mednick repeatedly underlines, the goal was to counteract the putative naturalism that dominates most of what we watch on film or television, a mode of acting that is made for cameras. For the utopia that was Off-Off-Broadway—and, by extension, Padua Hills—acting, Mednick explains, “is not (and should be) independent of behavior.”

One is tempted to describe what went on in this type of theater, with its celebration of the written word, as “poetic theater.” In fact, the term is used by several of the writers in the collection, not to mystify the theatrical experience but to clarify the goals at its origin. Mednick explicitly states that the movies (at least as practiced in Hollywood) are principally a visual art, while theater is “a listening art [...] mainly for the ear.” As with poetry, for the playwrights, directors, and actors who worked at Padua Hills, the musicality of their performances, including moments of silence, was uppermost.

Along with celebrating the theatrical text, these reflections also show how the entire Padua Hills experience, even with its New York pedigree, was fundamentally western. The playwright John Stepling begins his recollections by noting that the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop/Festival has been called a “postscript” to the Off-Off-Broadway scene, what Stepling recognizes as the “last great artistic movement of any kind in the United States.” This judgment could of course be argued, but Stepling goes on to observe that

Leo Brady on Acting  
Otherness and the  
Academy Awards....

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Padua Hills was “something else—something perhaps even more profound [...] something I suspect few of us who participated were fully aware of.” This entirely uncommon thing, Stepling maintains, wouldn't have happened on the East Coast. It could only occur in the West, and Padua Hills was, for Stepling, “the great Western theatre event of the late twentieth century.”

Stepling's description of the original festival site in the hills above Claremont is one of my favorite moments in the book:

We had no idea what we needed. What we needed would emerge. The heat was oppressive, and often I remember walking at twilight. I don't even remember any epiphanic moment, no satori. It was slower, deeper; the space gave off an emanation, and we accepted its decree. [...] Nobody was at all overtly “spiritual.” These were outlaws and misfits. Not an MFA in sight (well, there might have been, but they kept it a secret). But these were those organic intellectuals Antonio Gramsci spoke about. These were the intellectual gunfighters of the desert lands. Bad lands. And while Claremont does not bring to mind Deadwood or Tombstone, the open spaces and the old Spanish dinner theatre nestled up in the smoggy San Gabriel foothills, a place that felt like a kitsch wedding planner brochure, was being rehabilitated for theatrical insurrectionists.

Stepling and other contributors take as a starting point

the absence, perhaps even the refusal, of academic credentials among the participants in this groundbreaking project. For most of the writers involved, “the professionalization of art,” according to Stepling, “has been deadly. The way theatre is taught, largely, is antithetical to what happened during the Padua experiment. And people came. Drove two hours to sit outside beneath stars and moon, listening to coyotes. And to the words.”

My other favorite pieces in the collection, as accomplished and disarming in their visionary stance, are Marlane Myer’s “Despite Not Having a Dick,” Martin Epstein’s “A Padua Mosaic,” John O’Keefe’s “Chickenshit Theatre,” Beth Ruscio’s “In Praise of Humble Ingredients,” Anne García-Romero’s “A Padua Path,” and Gray Palmer’s “The Jungle of Views.” Looking back at this remarkably prolific time in American theater (as well as in the cultural history of Los Angeles), the reader is engaged and moved by the tumultuous voices in *Outlaw Theatre*, perhaps concluding, along with Stepling, that the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival was “the last best thing in American theatre. Of that there is simply no question.”

Two more points before closing. The first is the regrettable fact that there is no essay here by that grand figure of new theater, the late María Irene Fornés, who co-founded, along with Mednick, the Padua Hills experiment. While there are several tributes to Fornés, Cruz’s nuanced portrait of her at work, “The Adventures of Maria Irene and Me in Padua-land,” offers one of the book’s most

memorable contributions. Cruz's *Alice in Wonderland* metaphor serves her recollections well, pointing to Fornés's role at Padua Hills as both Mad Hatter and Queen of Hearts. "She placed herself firmly," Cruz notes, "at the center of experimental theatre among her male counterparts. She never pushed people aside. She just exploded over them."

Second, one ought to mention the strong intersection, in the 1970s and '80s, of artistic expression and political economy, a phenomenon that certainly pervades the writing in this book. The period saw elevated public funding for the arts fall victim to the casual terror ushered in by the Reagan administration—what Zimmerman, in his introduction, calls "the growing ideological assault during the 1980s of the free-market boondoggle ideology known as 'neoliberal' capitalism." He continues: "This long assault began in the 1970s and then entered its metastatic, species-ending phase under Ronald Reagan. We must remember that Los Angeles is the city where the communitarian spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal came to die."

One could easily go on reveling in a time when theater certainly was an alternative—or, perhaps better, an entirely other, more radically inventive—undertaking than movies or television, a time when poetically engaged theater was at the heart of innovation. Perhaps the last word should be reserved for Mednick, responding, in a final interview, to Gray Palmer's question, "What is theatre poetry?" "Well, first of all, it's rhythmic," the Padua Hills founder

put it, quite simply. "And one's rhythms are of course one's own. Like Beckett's rhythms are a little different than Pinter's. But they're basically coming from the idea that the text is what's important. That's the unifying idea about poetry in the theater. The text comes first."

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*Paul Vangelisti is an American poet, translator, and editor, and the founding chair of the Graduate Writing program at Otis College of Art and Design.*

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## CONTACT

### GENERAL INQUIRIES

[info@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:info@lareviewofbooks.org)

### MEMBERSHIP INQUIRIES

[membership@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:membership@lareviewofbooks.org)

### EDITORIAL INQUIRIES

[editorial@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:editorial@lareviewofbooks.org)

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