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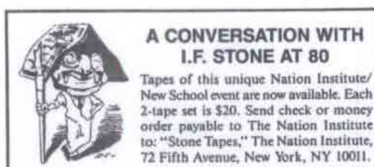

hart has ample occasion to indulge in some eloquent Nixon-bashing as he chronicles his own days in court. Typical of his spicy asides is a reminder that Nixon turned "expletive deleted" into "a household phrase overnight"; then, with somewhat less humor, Ehrhart observes that "even in their sanitized form," Nixon's White House tapes "revealed that the man who had promised Peace With Honor was a mean-spirited emotional hunchback with the vocabulary of a peep-show operator and the morals of a shark."

Such outbursts derive their justification from Ehrhart's desire to distance himself from policies and values he once upheld before learning to think for himself. Yet the dominant tone in *Busted* is neither bitterness nor anger but compassion. The true source of Ehrhart's moral authority as a critic of the Vietnam War rests on his steadfast refusal to traffic in the surreal romance of combat that so characterizes the picaresque school of Vet-Lit, and unwittingly feeds the "warrior dreams" of our young. □

At Play With the C.I.A. in Laos

SUSAN BROWNMILLER

BACK FIRE: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam. *By Roger Warner. Simon and Schuster. 416 pp. $25.*

Edgar "Pop" Buell was an Indiana farmer mourning his wife's death in 1960 when he signed up for the International Voluntary Services in Laos to put some meaning back into his life. His job: to teach the local people how to raise better livestock and get a greater yield from their crops. Shortly after he arrived upcountry, Buell met Maj. Vang Pao, who was an anomaly in the Royal Lao Army. He was a Hmong, that despised hill-tribe minority, in an officer corps of elite Buddhist Lao from the lowlands. Vang Pao's rugged, polygamous tribespeople cultivated the white opium poppy in cool limestone ridges as their sole cash crop, did without a written language and revered living spirits in animals and trees. Pop Buell took an instant shine to Vang Pao, sensing the young Hmong was a comer. As the secret war gathered momentum—its code name was, in fact, Operation Momentum—Buell stayed near the station, milking his role as the C.I.A.'s cover.

Bill Lair worked for the C.I.A. in Thailand during the 1950s. An ideological cold warrior from Texas who believed quiet patience could make a difference, he was a natural for the tiny Laos station, since the languages and cultures in upcountry Thailand and Laos are practically the same. Lair had a diffident manner for a Westerner. Using Thai paratroopers to train the Hmong, he stayed in the background, avoiding eye contact and not raising his voice. Lair's profile was so determinedly low that he kept his headquarters across the Mekong River at Udorn air base in Thailand.

The C.I.A.'s little nest of operatives put meaning into the word "spooks." There was Desmond FitzGerald, chief of covert operations for the entire region and Bill Lair's boss. The Ivy Leaguer's skin allergies erupted so badly in tropical sunlight that he wore dark glasses, face powder and gloves when he went out of doors. FitzGerald brought Tony Poe, *a k a* Anthony Poshepny, an ex-Marine of Hungarian origin, into the operation. Poe "went native" wherever he worked, in Tibet with the Khamba or in Sumatra trying to jump-start a revolt. In Laos he set up an incentive program by paying a bounty for enemy ears, married a Hmong woman and was thrown out of the operation, a broken-down drunk, before the war ended.

These are some of the players Roger Warner brings to life in *Back Fire*, a wry, compassionate narrative of the C.I.A.'s secret war in Laos.

Once, in the early 1960s, the mountainous, landlocked kingdom of Laos was the designated tinderbox of Indochina. The last to be acquired by France and the least remunerative of three neighboring countries granted their independence by the 1954 Geneva Accords—the two others were Vietnam and Cambodia—the impoverished nation was in the news daily. Pictured as a storybook realm of Buddhist temples, Stone Age hill tribes, wild elephant herds and curious monoliths scattered over a grassy plateau (the Plain of Jars), Laos had teapot coups and clashing princes—Boun Oum, Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma—whose names rolled on the tongue like

Susan Brownmiller's Seeing Vietnam: Encounters of the Road and Heart *(HarperCollins) is now in paperback.*

dark syrup. More to the point, its forested mountains and deep limestone caves offered hospitable shelter to the Pathet Lao, a pro-Communist guerrilla insurgency allied with the Viet Minh that seemed to be winning. Draped in a mantle of inherited cold war logic, President Kennedy pronounced the place "Lay-oss" and said we needed to preserve its neutrality.

By 1963 the main arena in America's war to contain the specter of Communism had shifted to Vietnam, and Laos had receded to a distant third place, behind Cambodia, in public attention. Tragically for the Laotians, out of sight did not mean out of mind. Warner writes, "From 1963 to 1973, behind a bizarre front of 'neutrality,' Laos was a secret annex to the main Vietnam theater, overseen by the U.S. ambassador, run by the Central Intelligence Agency, and bombed by the U.S. military, without the consent of Congress." Because the country was off-limits to reporters for most of that time, its sad plight never received a full, intelligible airing.

Warner accepts the theory that the focus shifted toward South Vietnam when the C.I.A. helped eliminate Saigon's Diem regime in a bloody, well-executed coup that took place twenty-two days before John Kennedy's assassination. The substitution of South Vietnam for Laos as the free world's bastion made excellent sense from a military standpoint. Flatter and more populous than its landlocked neighbor, the skinny coastal republic not only possessed a sizable minority of anti-Communist Catholics, it was accessible to the Seventh Fleet. Two years into the gung-ho presidency of Lyndon Johnson, there was no longer any doubt about the war's direction. In 1965, the first Marines waded ashore at Danang.

While American ground troops were hunkering down at Khe Sanh and digging into the Central Highlands, the North Vietnamese were supplying their southern comrades with manpower and munitions by means of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of footpaths through the mountainous Lao-Viet border. It is beyond the scope of *Back Fire* to cover every detail of the retaliatory air bombardment directed from Thailand, or to discuss the particulars of American pilots lost over Laos in the secret forays. Warner instead zeroes in on the most peculiar aspect of the undeclared war: the C.I.A.'s misbegotten strategy of a Hmong counterinsurgency in the mountains and how it grew. It is a horrific tale of blindsided do-gooders, overweening ambitions and bungled intentions.

The Hmong—who until the 1980s were called the Meo (Chinese for "savage")—were psychologically ripe for seduction by C.I.A. blandishments and fancy weapons. Resentful of the more numerous, sophisticated lowland Lao, the hill people treasured a creation legend of an earlier, happier epoch when they lived in cities and could read and write. In fact, the standoffish Hmong clans had migrated under the gun to northern Laos from southern China in the mid-nineteenth century, fleeing the Manchus. Their vivid appearance in the fertile, unpopulated ridges encircling the Plain of Jars preceded the arrival of the French colonials by a mere forty years. The French *arrivistes* purchased the Hmong's opium, funneling it to their refinery in Saigon, but otherwise left the touchy hill people alone. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao guerrillas came by with meddlesome ideas about nationhood, liberation and progress.

Less than a year after C.I.A. man Bill Lair sat down and talked turkey with a receptive Vang Pao, the ambitious young major, soon to be a full general, had recruited a fighting force of 10,000 men. Clothed, fed and armed by the C.I.A., and trained by the Thais, the tribesmen were helicoptered from their mountain hamlets to conduct increasingly elaborate skirmishes against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. At a peak strength of 30,000, the Hmong detachments achieved the dubious honor of being "neutralist" Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's only effective army.

At first it seemed like a miracle. A slash-and-burn tribe that had found no use for the wheel was calling in air strikes over enemy positions. His personal charisma elevated to mystical proportions by the firepower of his American advisers, Gen. Vang Pao began to dream that he might wind up in Vientiane as the supreme ruler of Laos. In the meantime he went about the more realistic business of getting his cut from the opium trade and collecting a half-dozen wives, who were domiciled individually in the capital city.

In time, of course, the canvas darkened. When the Hmong losses became unbearable and there were no fresh recruits to be dragged from the hills and the old way of life had been reduced to the crowded confines of refugee camps, Vang Pao bailed out. He fled to the United States in 1975, six months before the Pathet Lao's triumph. His departure heralded a new migration of disillusioned, embittered Hmong to the hills and valleys of central

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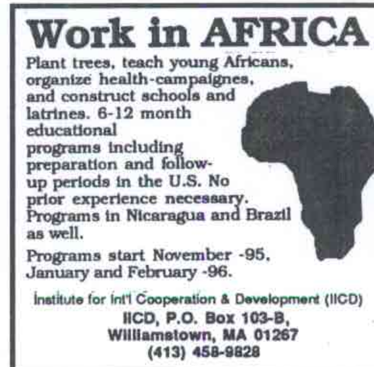

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NEW YORK

TAKIGI-NOH '95 George C. Wolfe, producer of The Public Theater, and the Japan-US Partnership for the Performing Arts, Inc., present the first full performance of Takigi-Noh in New York City, at Central Park's Delacorte Theater, on Friday, September 8, Saturday, September 9, and Sunday, September 10 at 8:00 PM (rain date is Monday, September 11). The Delacorte Theater will be illuminated by firelight for Takigi-Noh ("firewood"), which blends poetry, drama and dance; vocal and instrumental music; and elaborate costumes and masks. Tickets are free. For more information, call (212) 598-7100 or (212) 861-7277.

NAGASAKI, HIROSHIMA, and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb. Monday, September 18, 7:00-9:00 PM, International Center of Photography Uptown, 1130 Fifth Avenue (at 94th Street), Manhattan. Fifty years after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the decision to use atomic weapons remains controversial. This evening discussion, co-hosted by the Historians' Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima, is held in conjunction with the exhibition *Nagasaki Journey: The Photographs of Yosuke Yamahata.* Kai Bird (author of *The Chairman: John J. McCloy, The Making of the American Establishment* and co-chair of the Historians' Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima) will moderate. Panelists are Dr. Gar Alperovitz (author of *Atomic Diplomacy and The Decision to Use the Bomb*), Dr. Barton Bernstein (editor of *The Atomic Bomb* and professor of history at Stanford University), Hideko Tamura Snider (author of *Hiroshima Memories* and the forthcoming memoir *One Sunny Day*; survivor of the Hiroshima bombing), and Dr. Ronald Takaki (author of *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* and professor of ethnic studies, University of California, Berkeley). For information and reservations, please phone the ICP Education Department at (212) 860-1776 ext. 156. ICP members $8; non-members $10. No registration fee. Enrollment is limited. The galleries will be open from 5:00-7:00 PM before the symposium begins.

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California, where their ongoing adjustment problems occasionally break into the news.

Roger Warner had just finished college when Vang Pao began his life of exile in the United States. The young journalist started researching his Laos story in 1980, but was derailed by a predictable lack of cooperation from the C.I.A. Biding his time, he kept busy with other projects—*Haing Ngor: A Cambodian Odyssey*, the as-told-to autobiography of Haing Ngor, and a long essay to accompany Michael Freeman's photographs of the temples of Angkor. With the publication of *Back Fire*, Warner emerges as the first significant war historian of the post-Vietnam generation, indebted to Halberstam, Karnow, Shawcross, Sheehan and the undersung Alfred McCoy. Warner illuminates the making of an Asian warlord by the C.I.A. with grace and balance, parting company with McCoy on the extent of the agency's complicity in the Laos opium traffic. Warner agrees that the C.I.A.'s mission among the Hmong did not include a war on drugs, but he finds insufficient evidence for the claim that the Americans ended up running the trade. My conclusion after rereading McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin* is that Warner is making too fine a distinction.

The Hmong counterinsurgency was a way-out gamble, a helluva play for the buccaneer spooks. Clueless about global politics and the microscopic part they were assigned in the evolving Big Picture, the Hmong also gambled, and shouldered the loss. And two decades after the American air war, cluster bombs that failed to explode on impact are still claiming lives on the Plain of Jars. □

Muddy, Bloody Delta Blues

GENE SEYMOUR

RL'S DREAM. *By Walter Mosley. Norton. 286 pp. $22.*

Back in his daring-young-phenom period, Elvis Presley had a habit of prefacing a live performance of a song by saying it was his "latest escape—uh—*release*" from Sun Records or RCA. Youngblood prolly thought this was purdy cute stage patter. But it's also possible that singing those Arthur Crudup and Big Mama Thornton songs pried open Presley's subconscious to one of blues music's more inscrutable fundamentals: There is no escape from what's giving you the blues. There is only release from within.

By "release," I mean a self-contained rapture, an existential ecstasy that gives the body permission to let itself go. Reality's boundaries are still ringed with concealed weapons and no music on earth can melt them away. But whether the sounds they make are pungent or savory, the message yearning or demanding, blues musicians do their greatest magic by giving their listeners the resolve to withstand the pain of living.

Walter Mosley's four crime novels move, throb, pound and sway like the searing, take-no-prisoners riffs of classic rhythm-and-blues that set Presley's callow imagination on fire. Over a five-year period, *Devil in a Blue Dress, A Red Death, White Butterfly* and *Black Betty* have gained Mosley a cult readership so vast and heterogeneous it takes in the nation's number-one Elvis fan. (At least President Clinton *claims* to be a fan. Wonder if he ponders the distinction between escape and release.) Some of the books work through you leaving discordant, unsettling echoes of brutality and loss. Others, notably *Butterfly*, stay a little longer, the taste of remorse and hurt stinging the memory so much that you wonder how even Mosley can bear to peer into the shadows he summons.

One shouldn't worry about Mosley. He gains assurance with each expedition he makes into postwar Los Angeles's raucous, unpredictable black neighborhoods with their itchy-fingered fracases, their moody resilience, their raw, bitter humor. His protagonist, Easy Rawlins, has moved through the late forties, fifties and early sixties, dealing, inquiring and reflecting on the trouble he's seen with a rueful, suave, pungent voice that owes more to Amos Milburn, Charles Brown and T-Bone Walker than to comparably ruminative roughnecks like Spenser and Travis McGee, who get their dirty jobs done but carry the advantages that come with being pale males. One likes Rawlins enough to worry over his long-term safety, given the myriad dangers he faces from white thugs—in and out of police uniform—and his diminutive, homicidal best friend, Mouse. Once millions of moviegoers see

Gene Seymour is a staff writer at Newsday *whose forthcoming book is* Jazz: The Great American Art *(Franklin Watts).*