

by  
ERIC HENRY SANDERS

# Poetry of the Margins

Ben Katchor  
Mark Mulcahy  
and *The  
Rosenbach  
Company*

Here's your assignment: the Rosenbach Museum and Library approaches you to ask if you would produce a work celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. So what do you do? The museum houses a collection of rare books and documents, including the manuscripts of *Ulysses*, *The Pickwick Papers*, and *Lord Jim*, so perhaps you would highlight these in a laudatory essay. Or you might focus on its collected objects of historical literary interest – Herman Melville's bookcase, Lewis Carroll's drawings – or possibly even the history of the museum in the greater context of Philadelphia.

You probably would not think to write a theater piece which doesn't really focus on the collection at all but rather on the lives of the two brothers, Philip and Abe Rosenbach, the book dealers who founded the museum. You also might not think to expose the sordid details of these men's lives. Or to perform it as a musical.

As it happens, however, this assignment was put to the author and illustrator Ben Katchor, and the latter alternative is precisely what he delivered as his latest musical *The Rosenbach Company*, which had its New England premiere at the National Yiddish Book Center in April.

"They didn't know what they wanted," Katchor exclaimed between bites of cafeteria salad at nearby Hampshire College. "[The museum] got in touch with me because part of the Rosenbach collection was illustrated books ... and they wanted some kind of illustrated text. And I think they thought maybe a long comic strip. And I thought, 'No. If you're going to raise all of this money let's do it more as a public event.' And they bought it."

If you've heard of Katchor before now, it is probably because you've seen his comics, in either *The New Yorker* or one of his nationally syndicated strips, or you may have read one of his graphic novels or collected books, *Julius Knipl*, *Real Estate Photographer* being the most well known. Or perhaps you were on the MacArthur Fellows selection committee that honored him with a "genius grant" in 2000. If you're like me, though, you wouldn't have heard of him until you did, and then you would wonder why you hadn't.

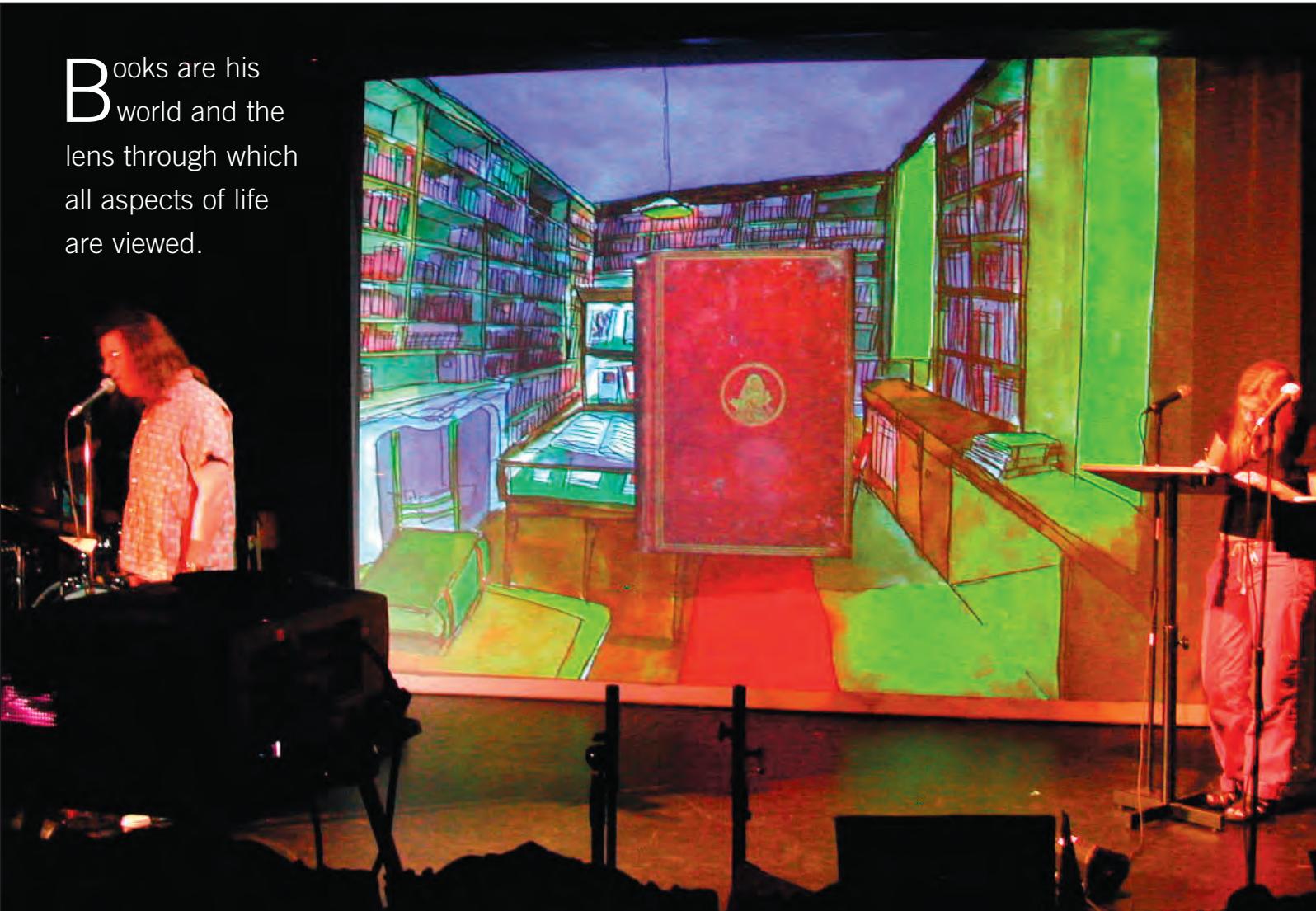
*The Rosenbach Company* is Katchor's third musical and his second collaboration with the singer-songwriter Mark Mulcahy. Their first musical together, *The Slug Bearers of Kayrol Island*, won an Obie Award and, as Mulcahy put it, was branded with "the scarlet letter of critical acclaim."

In the collaborative process, Katchor provides the book and drawings, and Mulcahy the music. “Collaboration should be two people adding to one thing, which transcends what one person could do,” Katchor elaborated. “The result is something that I couldn’t do and something beyond both of us. That’s a good collaboration. A bad collaboration is some watered-down version of two people.” Later, Mulcahy added

said, this kind of handling of text would work in a play, in a music piece.” Which brings me to the problem of genre.

For convenience, I lied when I called the play a musical. It was described to me before I saw it as “a music piece,” “a play,” “a theater piece,” “a rock opera,” “a kind of show, musical.” Katchor himself called it a light opera, referencing Gilbert & Sullivan and Offenbach: “In a strange way [our

Books are his world and the lens through which all aspects of life are viewed.



that the members of the band, too, “deserve a lot of credit for the arrangement.”

Katchor discovered Mulcahy when he saw him performing at a club in lower Manhattan. As one unnamed source recalls, “When Ben first heard Mark, he was kvelling, and he just never stopped.” In Katchor’s words, “What interested me in Mark’s music is how he set human speech to music. Which is what pop music does really well. A good pop musician is singing the lyrics of his songs. I heard Mark and I

shows] are more like opera – early opera – where everything is sung. We don’t even have recitative.”

In short, *The Rosenbach Company* is what happens when a group of spectacularly talented people are gathered in a room, doing something unusual. If good art is all about contrasts, *The Rosenbach Company* delivers the goods. It’s a study in combining high and low art, and the result is wonderfully harmonious. The story is told only through music, but it’s not what one would really think of as opera, because the music is

pop. As Katchor put it, “The opera tradition got split off and started torturing human speech – so much that you can’t do an English language opera without subtitles.” But the play isn’t really a rock opera, either; it has none of the camp that a “rock opera” would imply. It’s more of an indie-rock opera, demonstrating the way opera was meant to be – or would be if it were still populist. “Most shows are

several times, the story itself is more important than the method by which it’s conveyed. “The difference is most operas today are musician-driven,” Katchor mused. “The composer hands this score to a director and a musical director, and the directors are *really* not encouraged to go back to the composer and say ‘this doesn’t work theatrically. Rewrite it.’ They have this given: to try to make it



over-produced,” he continued. By contrast, “this is a really basic thing: there’s a band and singers, and this thing that’s like a picture book....The more stuff you pile on the less the viewer has to get engaged.” At the same time, their medium makes use of an entire history of storytelling – from representational art, to spoken language, to music, to moving picture. It has all the interactive qualities of vaudeville, music hall, silent film, and popular concert, so perhaps it is a new version of theater, for our time.

However, as both Katchor and Mulcahy emphasized

work. Mark wants this to work as a story, not a piece of music in his mind. It’s very different.”

And what it turns out to be is also deceptively simple: Katchor’s projected images, sometimes with a bit of simple animation, and live music. The projectionist follows the score and changes the projected image according to the music. The drawings are vivid red, blue, yellow, green watercolors over pen and ink, and as with Katchor’s other illustrations, the world is often viewed at odd angles, from behind bookshelves or through open doors.

Katchor knows about the obsessions of the collector. “I used to love to buy books, self-published crack-pot books, that no publisher would touch.”

When I arrived for a rehearsal the day before the performance at the Yiddish Book Center, a large screen already hung downstage center in the Applebaum-Driker Theater, taking up two-thirds of the stage. Arranged beside the screen were three microphones. I counted the band members: four. The musicians and singers hadn't taken their places. I counted the instruments: ten. Acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, two saxophones, clarinet, piano, keyboards, violin, drums. Later Mark added to this total, playing a cowbell and harmonica. When I tell you that

the band also sang, you will have a good sense of how hard they were working.

Katchor watched from the aisle, his hands in his pockets. He wore a green-gray wool crewneck sweater, blue-collared shirt, black jeans, brown shoes. His disheveled preppiness stood in marked contrast to the ur-hipness of the band – Brian Marchese, Henning Ohlenbusch, Dave Trenholm, and Catherine McRae – who sported an assortment of mix-and-match ripped jeans, artful t-shirts, wool skullcaps, clunky glasses, and tastefully retro sneakers. If you've ever been to a bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, you'll recognize the style. However, Mulcahy informed me that the musicians are mostly local. “They all have their own albums,” and added with an implied sigh, “All have other jobs.” If these talented musicians are a representative sample, it doesn't seem so far-fetched to imagine Northampton one day acquiring the kind of national reputation for music enjoyed by an Athens, Georgia, or a Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Because the show had already been produced in Philadelphia and New York, the rehearsal consisted mainly of a run-through, conveying to the newer performers various subtleties of the show. Mulcahy doesn't use sheet music, so any tweaking had to be demonstrated: first Mulcahy would sing a passage and then the singer would try to replicate his phrasing. Katchor explained, “Mark sings through it the first time, that's the perfect version of the show. And then it's getting the other actors to do that. And sometimes they improve it, but it's mainly getting the actors to do that, to sing the lines.”

To orient Mollie Weaver (*Narrator* and *Isabella Rosenbach*) when to begin the first number, Katchor

directed, “There's the last blue book, and when that goes off screen you can start. Now, Mollie, watch that.” She did. The book went off screen and she began to sing, her voice clear and beautifully resonant:

*A baby / sat upon a Turkish rug / in Philadelphia / in the nineteenth century. Its mother looked the other way / and the baby put a book into his mouth / to teethe upon a corner of / a book of English poetry. Until the mother saw and gently / pulled the book away. / What did a book taste like / in the nineteenth century / in Philadelphia?*

The baby is Abe Rosenbach. He is the youngest son of seven children born into a prosperous Jewish family. After he finishes teething on the corner of a book, he learns to read on his mother's knee, is sent to college by his oldest sibling (the aforementioned Philip), and there embraces headlong his “unmentionable disease”: bibliophilia. “Those are well-documented lives,” said Katchor of researching the brothers' story. “Because they kept every scrap of paper from their lives, from their childhoods. Their mother kept it and then they kept it, so that you know too much. There's too much material. It's an entire life – lives – laid out moment to moment. So the thing was whether it would be a life story, or an incident in their life. And it seemed that the story had to be: ‘what happens to you when you become infected by this and then you become the biggest book dealer in the world?’ And it had to be a Life Story. So it goes from his birth – Abe's birth – to his death....And death plays a big part in book collecting because books outlive you. Collectors depend upon people dying. So that became the story. A life. A condensed life in two acts.”

Later he elaborated wistfully, “I want him [Abe] to be able to jump off the Eiffel Tower, but you can't do that. He does other things – has his own incidents.” As with much of what Katchor said to me, this was delivered with the vocal equivalent of a shrug, implying, “I wish it were otherwise, but what can you do?”

As sung by Mulcahy, Abe is sincere and bookish until too much success corrupts him. He is a doted-upon child, and when given the chance, he becomes an inventive entrepreneur. Books are his world and the lens through which all aspects of life are viewed: from earliest life, when infants physically threaten books with mistreatment, to death and the legacy of book collections. Abe's relationships with women, too, are subordinate to books:

sexuality is perversely pulled from the pages of the Marquis de Sade. Mystery is rung from *The Black Mask* magazine. And ultimately, Abe is drawn into drink and scandal over the disputed authenticity of an uncut first edition of *Tom Jones*.

By contrast, Philip, as sung by Ryan Mercy, revels in abundant vanity. He is all mustache wax and yellow cambric trousers. And when he croons of love it is prompted by Isabella Fishblatt's admiration for the way his "pants flap in the ocean breeze."

Katchor realizes these characters with the same astute articulation he brings to his drawings. He is an extremely skilled storyteller, focusing the endless possibilities of Abe's entire life story into a clean narrative. Abe's rise and fall is at the heart of this plot, and he offers a range of emotions and tints to portray his life. This rising and falling progresses with such remarkable ease you might not notice how smoothly you are carried along by the narrative flow, except for a few moments when Katchor deliberately exposes the dramatic mechanism behind the clock-face. The best example is an Act I cliff-hanger to make Pearl White proud: Abe is transporting a Shakespearean folio back to Philadelphia in a specially designed crate when a porter drops the crate onto the train tracks as a train rapidly approaches. Abe is helpless to save it, and calls down Shakespearean curses on the head of the hapless porter: "Thou bitch-wolf's son, can you not hear?" "Thou hast no more brains in thy head than I have in my elbow." As Abe's invective becomes a mournful plea to save the books – "Won't somebody help me?" the curtain falls and an intermission fraught with tension is upon us. Then, in one of the show's funniest moments, as Act II begins Katchor dashes off a resolution and, with a knowing wink, continues with the real story at hand.

When Mulcahy performs he seems entirely at ease. There is a fluid confidence in his voice and the two other main singers, Mercy and Weaver, both have lovely and personable voices which exceed their task. In rehearsal the trio would often laugh after completing a song, seemingly either at the solemnity of the song itself, the silliness of the song itself, or some combination of general enjoyment with each other and the event. Again, as with Katchor, I had a feeling of both being in on a secret – I have discovered something rare and exciting – and a vague feeling that perhaps I had been living in ignorance and that other people have been enjoying all this great stuff unbeknownst to me. I was even more impressed when I later learned that Mollie Weaver had only been working with the rest of the group for two days. She had learned the music from a recording, and they were only

now assembled for the performance. And, if you needed further proof that you are dealing with highly capable people, you need look no further than the fact that during the rehearsal Mark was able to write notes to himself in a brown flip-book while singing. Not between verses either.

The music, like the story, is deceptively simple and difficult to describe. If you shook up Morphine, Yo La Tengo, Poi Dog Pondering, mid-career Beatles, Tom Waits, and Nick Drake, and crossed it with Edwardian popular music-hall music – you might get close. But what's more important than the exact source is the complexity of the experience conveyed by a series of contrasts and contradictions. The words carry the same kind of distancing irony that you might find in Beck or Ben Folds – the kind that makes you laugh at their wit-tiness at the same time you're tapping your foot to the music. However, there is a pathos carried through the lyrics which is inviting and genuine. And still Mulcahy manages to combine erudition with the surprising trick of actually telling a story.

The confluence of the project and its performance at the Yiddish Book Center could not have been more appropriate. Katchor is someone who knows a good deal about the obsessions of the collector. "I used to love to buy books, self-published crack-pot books, that no publisher would [touch].... Basically books and printed things that I knew that I couldn't find in a library." And his interest in Yiddish culture can be traced back to his own childhood: he grew up in a Yiddish-speaking household in Brooklyn – he was born in Bedford-Stuyvesant opposite Tompkins Park, then lived on East Second and Church Avenue. His father listened to the great Yiddish singers of the day and owned a collection of 78s. Katchor is also versed in Yiddish theater, which he described as starting out "as an evening of songs. And then somebody said, 'well let's sing a few songs together.' It began as variety. An evening of songs, jokes." He elaborated on the cultural ubiquity of Yiddish theater, which he describes as a parallel world to Broadway: "Somebody growing up in New York, like my mother, she could choose: am I going to a show on Second Avenue tonight or am I going to go to a Broadway show? And she always liked the Yiddish shows better....All of those people came from Europe, and [the Yiddish shows] had a more European sensibility." When I

"It's somewhere between a circus and vaudeville show."

asked whether he saw himself as a part of that tradition, Katchor replied quickly, “While I’m doing these shows, yes.” He added with a grin, “We pack up our equipment. It’s somewhere between a circus and vaudeville show.”

The description seemed apt, not so much for the aesthetic, but for the choice of comparison. Like circuses and vaudeville shows, and indeed like Yiddish, there is, in

tion. And the result is deadpan. You wonder if he’s kidding, which of course he is. But it’s like a child being kidded by someone with a much richer sense of humor. The laughter comes from a feeling of “No! Really? No!”

Ben Katchor’s aesthetic is unmistakably his own – lovely and uncanny. Not surreal, but uncanny, describing a world on the periphery or just beyond, in the world of fantasy.



Katchor’s work, a deep affection for a rich and marginalized past.

George Plimpton described Marianne Moore as having a poet’s eye for the periphery. Though he’s a cartoonist and playwright, the same could be said for Ben Katchor. The world he has created is remarkably similar to the unexplored peripheries of our own. There’s no reason why inhabiting the margins there couldn’t be an imposter of folding rain bonnets or an island dedicated to protecting tape-worms, as there are in his graphic novels. But where Marianne Moore found the poetic in observation, Ben Katchor finds it in fic-

Taking his opus as a whole, one is immersed in a universe of unusual lost objects: books and love affairs, old men and places, and history at odd angles. And when that poetry of the margins is paired with the music of Mark Mulcahy, the results are even more extraordinary.

---

*Eric Sanders’s plays have had performances and readings in theaters across the country and abroad. His most recent play, The Heliopause, completed in part with a grant by Amherst College, will be produced by the Talawa Theatre Company (London) in 2007.*