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John S. Bak

Introduction to Mark SaFranko and to the Ariel Project

Fig. 1



Mark SaFranko

Credits: Projet ARIEL

- 1 Born 23 December 1950 in Trenton, New Jersey, Mark SaFranko is one of the last Renaissance men. Writer, painter, musician, SaFranko is also a playwright, whose one-act and full-length plays date from the early 1990s to 2018 and have been produced at home in New York and Connecticut, as well as abroad in Londonderry (Northern Ireland) and Cork (Eire). In 1992, his one-act play *The Bitch-Goddess* was selected Best Play of the Village Gate One-Act Festival in New York.

- 2 SaFranko is currently in Nancy, France, where he is writer-in-residence at the Université de Lorraine as part of its ARIEL project for 2018-19. ARIEL, the acronym for “Author in International Residence in Lorraine,” offers a four-month residence to an international artist who conducts master classes with university students and interacts with the general public by giving readings and occasional lectures. The program, run by the university’s UFR ALL-Nancy and IUT Nancy-Charlemagne, was created to bridge the artistic gap between university and general publics, to showcase Lorraine’s cultural heritage, and to support the Grand Est Region’s efforts to diversify its international interests.
- 3 The ARIEL project carries three main goals: creativity and reflection on the creative process, translation, and mediatization. The following interview, which took place in Nancy on 26 November 2018, was intended to address all three project goals with respect to Mark SaFranko’s career in the American and international theatre.
- 4 For more information on the ARIEL PROJECT: <http://residence-ariel.fr/>

In Interview with Mark SaFranko

John S. Bak: Being of man of many talents, where does playwriting fit into the hierarchy of what you see as your main artistic focus? Can you talk about your formal training in the theatre and how it prepared you to become a playwright?

Mark SaFranko: There was no formal training. My training consisted of spending time in the theatre, watching and studying plays, reading plays and trying to figure out what makes them work. I regard writing for the theatre as an essential part of the fabric of my entire writing life. It’s just another thread, so to speak.

J.B.: Your plays have been produced both in America and abroad, sometimes in translation. Could you talk for a few minutes about your international experiences? Do you find that European audiences respond to your work differently than American audiences and, if so, why is that the case?

SaFranko: I actually haven’t ever seen one of my plays produced on foreign soil, so I’m not at all certain how European audiences responded. The reviews of the productions have been positive, I can say that.

J.B.: Have you worked closely with your foreign translators? What were the major obstacles you encountered in the translating process? Were they more linguistic- or culture-based hurdles?

SaFranko: The single instance of one of my plays being translated was *Seedy*, or *Minable*, into French. The play remains unproduced either in the U.S. or in Europe, but it was published in France. I had no contact whatsoever with the translator, which is highly unusual in my experiences with translators.

J.B.: Your plays are frequently situated in the East of the U.S., often New York City. And yet, the West coast is referenced, usually Hollywood, which leaves the impression that you find that there exists an antithetical relationship between film-culture Los Angeles and theatre-culture New York (or even fake versus real). Both Sharon Striker in *The Promise* and Eddie Tilsen in *Seedy*, for instance, refer to film casting directors as looking at “strips of raw meat” when they select actors for roles. Many are the names of serious writers who have been

seduced by Hollywood's allure. Do you see yourself as being strictly a playwright, or would you accept scriptwriting offers were Hollywood to come calling?

SaFranko: Of course the money of a screenwriting gig would be too tempting to turn down. I've written several spec scripts based on my own work, but none has been produced, which is not an unusual occurrence in the film world. I'm fond of saying that when you insert an electrical plug on a film set it costs a million dollars, and therein lies the rub. The money involved in film production makes a finished product mostly a fantasy. As far as the antithetical relationship is concerned, it's been my observation that in the past New York actors liked to think that doing "pure" theatre was somehow superior to falling for the allure of Hollywood, but I'm not sure that's still the case. The boundaries between the worlds have grown more muddled, especially since "stars" are often needed to make New York theatre productions stay afloat and turn a profit.

J.B.: Hungry actors and actresses populate your plays, willing to do near anything to get a part, like Wendy in *The Promise* or Eddie in *Seedy*. Both Eddie and Sharon hound talent agents, like Harvey Gillman in *The Promise*, and the message that comes across is that actors are "cold" until they get a part, and then they need to stay "hot" and in the limelight, no matter what it takes. Is this your experience with the theatre?

SaFranko: My experience is that most actors stay cold! The truth is that very, very, very few actors ever get to a significant place in either theatre or film. It's about as brutal a business as there is. And when you think about it, the barriers to entry are few. You don't have to play an instrument, you don't have to write something, you don't have to be able to paint a picture. All you have to do is say the lines that someone else wrote, and you're an actor. So anyone can do it. This generates a lot of hope on the part of the dreamers and wannabes. And once you do it, you have to hope that you're well connected, or look good in front of the camera, or have a certain charisma that makes people want to look at you. And that you are very, very lucky.

J.B.: Prostitution is a common theme in your plays, the way we all sell ourselves to make ends meet, whether it is the exotic dancer Tracy Sinnett (Esmeralda) with Eddie in *Seedy* or Edwin Reaves with John Campbell and his company in *Incident in the Combat Zone*, or the actors Eddie and Sharon just discussed. Life is learning about the limits and consequences, to ourselves and others, of our self-prostitution, no?

SaFranko: I think that since we are all victims to at least some extent, it's a matter of learning how to reconcile oneself to the form of prostitution we're trapped in.

J.B.: Because self-prostitution intimates self-preservation in your plays, and the stage or screen are often the media in which this financial transaction takes place, false appearances becomes a key theme in your work. As Eddie says about Tracy/Esmeralda: "It's hard to tell with you what's real and what's not" when she is no longer wearing her wig. Acting is about appearances, of course, but are we all just play-acting in life in order to survive?

SaFranko: I think yes, to a greater or lesser degree. It's unavoidable. I think it's why it so often happens that we don't know who is lying right next to us in bed, so to speak.

J.B.: You are a painter as well as a playwright, and art figures at times in your plays, as in *Seedy*, for instance, where Eddie points out the original Fischls, Dalis, and Saint Johns to Tracy/Esmeralda: "Some collection, huh? Hank's "investments." Since your plays are often about power struggles, and money nearly always plays a part in that equation, what is your take on the marriage of art and money?

SaFranko: On one level it's complicated, and on another it's quite simple. Very few artists make money at their profession. We all want it, we all need it, but the rewards go to only a small percentage of the people working at it. Nowadays, it seems to me that

genuine art is further and further removed from what is commercially successful, especially in the U.S. Anything that doesn't earn significantly—regardless of its artistic worth—is considered beneath contempt and will have a very difficult time finding an audience.

J.B.: Because money is such a major concern with your characters, some for survival and others for excessive pleasure, your plays contain frequent attacks on hypocrisy, often against conservative “family values” that are false fronts for greed. As Jean Simonsen admits in *Incident in the Combat Zone*: “All of you at the top, you're all the same aren't you? And all this ridiculous propaganda about country, and family values, and touching one another's lives, it's all just trash, just a pile of lies....” Can you elaborate on this, since playwriting is itself inherently hypocritical? I mean, it offers up pretense as reality, and pursues artistic results, but still desires box-office success?

SaFranko: Well, you've found me out! And yes, you are correct: we can uncover hypocrisy in ourselves at practically every turn.

J.B.: Fame is another common theme in your plays, from Wendy to Eddie to the Suspect in *Interrogation # 2*, who says: “We have no identity without fame.” This last play was written in 2002, before the likes of a Kim Kardashian or a YouTuber, who today seek out fame at nearly any cost. Is celebrity an American phenomenon, or least different from other cultural notions of fame, and who is ultimately responsible for this mad push, the individual him- or herself, the media machine, the consumer?

SaFranko: It looks to me that the mad pursuit of celebrity is a peculiarly American disease. Not that it probably doesn't exist elsewhere, but it seems particularly rabid in the U.S. Why? What this signifies is a profound emptiness in the psyche and soul of the American. What else but a void would account for such a powerful urge to be seen and known? When you think about it, it's extraordinarily sad. And the disease has progressed to the point where some skill or talent isn't even required for notoriety. I mean, look at who many of the most famous people in the world are.

J.B.: One of the recurrent messages in your plays is honor thy benefactor, a common theme in Georgian theatre. The idea is that, in the entertainment business at least, it is all about being loyal to and paying back those who have lent you a helping hand. As Eddie says of Hank's generosity: “Payback, he said, for helping him out way back when. That's the way this business is supposed to work for people with any kind of memory.” Eddie utters something similar in *Seedy*, Reaves confesses it to John and to Jean in *Incident in the Combat Zone*, and we find Harvey saying it to Wendy in *The Promise*. And yet, Eddie won't show Tracy the grace that Hank showed him when he was down and out. Does this justify his murder in the end the play, a sort of instant karma or poetic justice?

SaFranko: I would say probably yes.

J.B.: Let's talk a bit about your philosophy of life. In your play *The Promise*, the pro/ antagonist Harvey says, “You know when free will operates? In—what's the word?—retrospect. That's when. In re-tro-spect. The free-will fairytale has caused more unnecessary guilt than any other idea in the history of the world.” Is this your philosophical musing or just a casual line spoken by an opportunist?

SaFranko: You know, it is actually largely what I believe, I suppose. I'm something of a determinist. Once character is set, do we have much choice about anything? How does the cliché go? Character is destiny.

J.B.: I'd like now to turn to the relationships between genders in your play, surely one of their dominant themes. You have two strippers, Esmeralda (Tracy Sinnett) in *Seedy* and Wendy La Brava (Josie Kamenitski) in *The Promise*. Many of your female characters, from Wendy to Tracy to the Suspect's victim, bear tattoos and piercings. And many of your male characters are openly misogynistic and see women as sexed or sexual objects, such as

Jack and Paul in *The Bitch-Goddess*, who are both relentless in their criticism of Irene as a former partner. Even the Suspect in *Interrogation # 2* says bluntly: "I wouldn't fuck her with your dick." Would you care to elaborate?

SaFranko: Well, this is the characters speaking, not me. Many men have this outlook on women, though not often to such an extreme. I happen to be honest enough to record those words and thoughts—not that I'm looking for credit. As far as the body markings are concerned, it makes for a dramatic sight on stage, doesn't it?

J.B.: And yet, despite your male characters' rather abusive views about women, you are critical of predatory sexuality, as seen with Harvey in *The Promise*. Written in 2002, *The Promise* is certainly relevant today, nonethemore given that the lead character's name is Harvey, an eerie premonition of Harvey Weinstein. However, in spite of Harvey's obvious despicable treatment of his female clientele, it is Wendy who says: "Sometimes people have to be used on the way up, but that's just the way it is...." Do you see the couch audition culture of Hollywood as a simple quid pro quo, given the "glut" of actors and the "damn few parts" available for them all?

SaFranko: I think many actors—especially attractive women—would agree with your assessment.

J.B.: Is gender equality possible then, at least in the entertainment business? Or is infidelity, another recurrent theme in your plays, unavoidable? I mean, the list of the unfaithful in your plays runs long. Harvey cheats on his wife and lies to her in *The Promise*, just like Eddie in *Seedy*: "Well, with the wife and kid gone, what's to stop me?" The character Ferdy Venturi lived up "in the Valley before his wife caught him with the neighbor's daughter and kicked him out." John Campbell cheats on his wife with young boys in *Incident in the Combat Zone*. Even Irene is far from the perfect partner for either Jack Royko (any reference to Mike?) or Paul Tenucci in *The Bitch-Goddess*. Is fidelity, like the stage itself, an illusion?

SaFranko: I would think so. But people are wired differently. Some people are made for fidelity. However, when a person becomes more and more famous, or rich, or prominent, perhaps fidelity is difficult because the opportunities for extracurricular activity increase exponentially.

J.B.: In *The Promise* and in *No...?*, you seem to be searching for gender complicity to the sexual problem confronting Americans (and even the French) that differentiates mutual desire from sexual harassment or abuse. Again, given the #MeToo movement, was *No...?* your response to the many accusations sweeping through various male-dominated industries and was it, perhaps, even influenced by David Mamet's *Oleanna*, a similar response nearly three decades earlier? Are you taking sides in the debate or do you just want to show how all incidents have two perspectives, and that both genders need to see things from the other's side? After all, even Eddie is propositioned in *Seedy*: "Merle Moonaker wanted to get into our pants, see? And he looked into my eyes, and he knew right away he wasn't getting my cock—no way—see what I mean? That's what it really was." For you, it is not simply a female issue, but one that affects all who must bow to power, though surely women have historically been more abused than men, no?

SaFranko: While I did see *Oleanna* many years ago, the play was not at all in my mind when I wrote *No...?* It was inspired by a different experience altogether, and I did want to show that such incidents can have different perspectives, though by no means always. Because absolutely, women have been more abused than men.

J.B.: Your plays often paint a fine line between sexual consent and rape, as with John and Liz in *No...?*, and, to a certain extent, with Eddie and Tracy/Esmeralda in *Seedy* and John Campbell and his young trade Brent in *Incident in the Combat Zone*. Rape, power, money and business are all uncomfortably intertwined here. As Reaves tells Campbell, "I made it clear to my contact at The Times that we would consider substantially cutting our advertising, if not pulling it altogether. And why strain a mutually profitable relationship?" Is America

ultimately responsible for the current gender war being waged because it has always equated sex, power and money in the workplace? Or are individuals alone to blame for not keeping it in their pants? Or, again, are we all complicit?

SaFranko: That's an incredibly complex question. And I don't know the answer to it. I will say, however, that another old saw applies here as well: absolute power corrupts absolutely, I believe it goes.

J.B.: Let's lighten up the discussion a bit now. Humor in your plays often serves a dual function: to coax a laugh out of the audience and to carry a fairly dark double entendre, such as with the naked John Campbell running down the streets in *Incident in the Combat Zone* and being told "And the people who called the police couldn't tell you from Adam." Or again, with Paul Tenucci in *The Bitch-Goddess* turning away from his wife Irene's casket and saying "Goodnight, Irene, I'll see you tomorrow," a close echo of the refrain from the popular Lead Belly song "Goodnight, Irene" (1933) about the singer's distraught past with his faithless love Irene and his desire to get even with her in his dreams. Do you see yourself as a writer of dark comedies, social dramas or human tragedies?

SaFranko: That's a very good question, and I realize now that you've made me think about it that much of the humor in my writing surfaces in my plays. Is it intentional? I don't know. But I would say that humor notwithstanding, I'm probably a writer of human tragedies.

J.B.: Finally, as you know, I'm a big Tennessee Williams fan, and I noticed in your plays many references to his life and work. Your plays are often cut into scenes, as were a few of his, mostly notably *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There is also a specific reference to *Streetcar* and an "inconsistent Southern accent" in *The Promise* and the allusion to the "kindness of strangers" in *Seedy*. In her long monologue at the opening of scene seven of *The Promise*, Sharon muses: "Many talented people have been rejected, I remind myself of that every single morning when I wake up alone in my bed out in Jersey. Think of them: Van Gogh. Strindberg. Tennessee Williams in his later years." Could you discuss a bit your interests in Williams and in his work?

SaFranko: Well, it began when I played Stanley in *Streetcar* back in 1971 on a college stage. I was twenty years old at the time. The play had a strong effect on me, and I got interested in Williams as an artist, and, as you know, there was a lot to become acquainted with. I became a particular fan, ironically, of several of his early short stories. *Streetcar* remains a favorite, as well as the story and screenplay of *One Arm*. I'm also fond of *Kingdom of Earth*, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and many of the one-acts. And I also love the novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. He left quite a legacy.

J.B.: Thank you so much, Mark, for our talk. I think it is safe to say that I, and all the readers, have learned a lot about your artistic vision and your theatrical talents to project that vision on the stage. I wish you the best in all your future playwriting endeavors.

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Mark SaFranko, writer in residence in Nancy for the Projet ARIEL.

Entretien avec l'auteur Mark SaFranko en résidence à Nancy dans le cadre du Projet ARIEL.

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Mots-clés: acteurs/actrices, argent, The Bitch Goddess culture du monde du cinéma/théâtre, gloire, humour, Incident in the Combat Zone, inégalités de genres, Interrogation # 2, The Promise, prostitution, public, Seedy, traduction

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