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The Jackleg Testament, Part One: Jack and Eve - Artist Jay Bolotin with his postmodern take on Genesis, the first woodcut motion picture ever made

Abstract

Jay Bolotin, artist, writer, composer, musician and revisionist, has transformed his signature relief prints and mixed media into the first ever woodcut motion picture titled, *The Jackleg Testament, Part One: Jack and Eve*. In this first edition of a proposed trilogy, Bolotin revisits the Genesis story and reexamines familiar Old Testament themes and re-imagines them in a postmodern vein and format without sacrificing their mythic power and fascination. This article discusses this work within the context of a recent world tour and performance, interviews with Bolotin and subsequent viewings of the exhibit and “motion picture.”

“Make way! Make way!” A key line spoken often by the title character in *The Jackleg Testament*, heralds, also, the coming of its creator, Jay Bolotin, a multi-talented artist born in Fayette County, Kentucky, and currently living in Cincinnati, Ohio. Like many artists who are seldom prophets in their own land, he has captivated audiences in the United States and Europe who, frankly, didn’t see this unassuming, Kentucky born gentleman and Renaissance man in his mid-fifties coming. In simple terms, Bolotin is an original, an American treasure whose refreshing lack of fanfare and hype means that he likely will continue to surprise and be discovered by grateful viewers as they make way for his next appearance.

Despite appearances, there is nothing “simple” about Bolotin’s vision as witnessed in his hugely imaginative film, a profound and profane variation on the Genesis story or the Fall of Man which is subtitled *Part One: Jack and Eve*. Five years in the making from gestation to digitization, the artist couches this first of three Books in expressionistic imagery and language from a myriad of influences from Bruegel and Blake to PUNCHINELLO and Tolkien. Yet regardless of the source, Bolotin’s cast of characters and outcomes in this very grim, dense and ironic tale are very much in character with the artist’s personal beliefs and upbringing. *The Jackleg Testament, Part One* is more Bolotin’s imagining of a prehistory to the Fall of Man that doesn’t involve Adam at all, presuming that he may or may not return

in the next two editions. Though risking blasphemy perhaps, Bolotin shrugs it off with an eloquent defense of poetic license.



Jay Bolotin, American - Born 1949 - "Playing Violin"
Still from the film - "The Jackleg Testament," 2006
Courtesy the artist

“By Jackleg perhaps I am poking fun at myself, in that this connotes a certain ‘made up’ quality,” Bolotin said. “However, as in William Blake’s poem, Milton...’The Imagination is not a state—but Human Existence itself’—I do not discount the ‘made-up.’ Just as I see no reason not to take such people as Kafka as being Holy Writ. Sometimes it helps me to read a text as though it carries the same weight as the Bible does for some....Kafka’s work, for example, seems written much in the same way that passages of the Old Testament are written, in a mythical language that seems more akin to ironic, cautionary tales, or say high children’s literature. I recall thinking Pinocchio was a book of the Bible when I was a child. Maybe, the best one.”

Jackleg is essentially a digitally animated opera made of bluesy country tunes and grass roots music that Bolotin has created in past theatrical works like *Limbus: A Mechanical Opera* and *The Hidden Boy* and voiced by himself and a cast of professional singers. It is constructed of 37 woodcut prints which serve as a storyboard for the film. The woodcuts, which resemble a paper doll book in that each print is a segmented character's body and costume along with set and props, were photographed first, then processed further in Photoshop and reassembled in another program, AfterEffects, and made to move puppet-like in a quasi 3D space. The animation is further enhanced by an omniscient moving camera and layers of dense atmosphere and a darkly moody mise en scene. The resulting computer animation film is a bit of an anomaly as no film is used and characters are something less than animated, moving occasionally only their arms and lower jaws. Nevertheless, Jackleg is constantly in motion and never fails to move or challenge the viewer.

Factor in key Biblical players whose often nude bodies and world-weary visages haunt rather than occupy their landscapes and one quickly leaves the Old Testament behind. Which would suggest that Bolotin is like other postmodern artists and filmmakers who seem to eschew idealism or absolute values and above all assert that experience and meaning can be created by the individual and not made objective by author or narrator. This revisionist spin on Genesis is

contemporary both in form and theme as its point of view is equal parts satiric and humanistic as in the grand benevolent style of Chaucer, who also understood human nature within its own its own time frame.



Bolotin gives an early indication that he is time and place-tripping when the prologue quotes Kafka: “We were fashioned to live in paradise and paradise was destined to serve us. Our destiny has been altered; this has also happened with the destiny of paradise not stated.” In his version of paradise lost, filled with many ironies, Eden more resembles an impoverished wasteland. Adam is nevertheless a dutiful non-entity and Eve seems ready for anything. The god-head is Nobodaddy, a name mystic poet William Blake used in disdain for the Biblical God he envisioned as a manipulator-trickster. Nobodaddy, who lives high in his tower in Nobotown of the Western Regions, decides to toy with his creation and sends a Jack-in-the-box (along with the serpent), aptly named Jack, to tempt Eve, not with an apple -- though one makes a clever appearance -- but with a violin.

The choice of a Jack-in-the-box to do Nobodaddy's bidding is also apt as the toy's origin theories have it that it was either the devil's castaway or a runaway slave ("Jacks" is a slang term) caught and trapped in a box. Nobodaddy temporarily sets Jack free and he entices Eve away to a life of pleasure and musical performances in the theater ("Make way, make play"). Before they leave Eden for the Theater of the Western Regions, Jack seems to deride Adam's conformity and reliability: "Well, steady as they go, of course, is certainly to be admired/or—maybe he's a dolt." As for Nobotown, Jack is equally ambivalent: "Is it Heaven or is it Hell?" Eve asks. Jack answers, "Could be one or could be the other. A hair is all betwixt the two." Which helps explain why Eve seeks her fortune outside of her box as well, a "paradise" where roles are prescribed and emotion rote as if by remote control. Just for the thrill of being alive, no matter the risk.

Eve risks a lot as she accepts the violin from Jack (I'm the petty devil") as he strokes it in her hand with his bow on stage before an assembled audience. They play intrepidly, one part command performance, one part rebellion, but, as in all things outside of paradise; it is temporary. The wrath of Nobodaddy is aroused and Nobotown burns and crumbles to the ground. Nobodaddy has won the day but not before the serpent tosses Eve an apple which grows with promise in her hand. As for Jack, he is summarily kicked back into his box as Nobodaddy shape shifts into a whirlwind, one of the film's several references to the power of fate. Is Nobodaddy

evil? Is mankind doomed? Bolotin has said that in the Adam and Eve story he discovers “a God that seems wistfully benevolent and then suddenly vindictive and regretful, even regretful of his regret.” In *The Jackleg Testament, Part One*, Nobodaddy plays with the fate of his creation after set free because, the film says, “It’s a matter of amusement. It’s his hobby.” In the epilogue, though, Nobodaddy hardly seems to enjoy his own mischief. “Silence,” he tells the chattering serpent, “get thee to the theater. Leave me to mourn the passing of a tale.”

Bolotin, however, enjoys his “mischief.” He is a master storyteller whose tale relies heavily on richly figurative imagery, operatic flourishes and the occasional use of colorful Anglo-Saxon language. Above all, Bolotin is neither didactic nor moralistic. All of his characters, even Nobodaddy, are products of his affection and their own melancholy. Though it appears to weigh heavily upon them, they struggle existentially against all odds, even Nobodaddy whose part is sung by Bolotin, a wizard himself.

“Yes, I do develop a kind of love for all those characters. In the case of Nobodaddy, I came to imagine him...as being sexually impotent because of age and fatigue,” he said, “and that he yearns after Eve, and that in the end he is living through Jack, who retains a spirit of adventure and vitality and creation...I find the god of the Old Testament to be an oddly human character, full of confusing goals and wants.”

Regarding the video's creation Bolotin said that when making the first part of The Jackleg Testament it was not hard to imagine that every few epochs this god puts on a play in the Theater of the Western Regions (Bolotin's term for western civilization) and that "we may be characters in his current production. In this one (Jackleg) his play went somewhat awry, taken over by Jack, who exerts his right as a toy, a plaything, a play, the imagination, something older, I believe than the concept of God. I followed where Jack led me. Perhaps some would infer that this version of the story did not work out, and God/Nobodaddy, in a subsequent production, tried again with the story we have all heard (Genesis)."

Bolotin, the consummate artist, continues to identify with God with a second part he is currently working in his trilogy concerning this time a character named Enoch based on two sources. The first is the Book of Enoch, from the Old Testament Pseudepigraphia, which he explains are "books that were not included in the codified version of the Old Testament, likely for political reasons." The second source is his manuscript based on his Enoch, the son of the only Jewish coal miner from Kentucky. This second book in the planned trilogy will likely be a "painted motion picture," and its imagery and screenplay will be based on this manuscript, *The Book of Enoch's Trials in the Labyrinth*. In it Bolotin writes, "Eventually, one crawls up out of the muck and walks."

