Hardcover: US

William Dalrymple bridges the gaps

'Nine Lives' successfully straddles India's competing dichotomies

BY **JONATHAN SIDHU**
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO

Within mainstream American discourse, the idea of India can occupy a narrow space.

Westerners often fixate on India's deeply spiritual character with subtle condescension: India is an awe-inspiring, mystical land — with a panoply of exotic faiths, impenetrable rituals and age-old spiritual principles.

Meanwhile, in recent years, we have seen an almost limitless number of books reflecting on economic growth in India — whose titles, like Mad Libs, always seem to include some combination of "Rise," "Race" "Post-American" and "Imagine" (while pitting "Elephants" against "Dragons").

With some exceptions, these two narratives — India's "premodern" religiosity, and its growing economy — are often presented as diametric opposites, simply unrelated, or the first and last points on something like a scale of modernity. How they interact, unfortunately, is seldom explored.

In this context, William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* is not only a masterful text, but it is also an extraordinarily important book. Dalrymple explores nine tales of deeply spiritual individuals whose lives are intersected by the social upheavals occurring in modern India. Many of these stories, he writes, exist "in the places suspended between modernity and tradition." Like the suspension between "modernity" and "tradition," each vignette almost exists somewhere between reality and fantasy.

Dalrymple, a Scottish travel writer and historian, has previously written strongly narrator-driven books like *City of Djinns*, his acclaimed travelogue of Delhi. What is unique about *Nine Lives* is that Dalrymple has sought to "keep the narrator firmly in the shadows, so bringing the lives of the people I have met to the fore and placing their stories firmly center stage."

Simply as stories, each discrete episode is an emotive and moving tale of how an individual found, or inherited, a path to spiritual dedication. Dalrymple, like the poetic Rajasthani *bhopa*, or bard, he follows, tells stories that are lyrical yet deeply ruminative.

But often, these nine lives capture larger issues or trends, beyond the specificity of each individual's story. One tale is a *devdasi* in Karnataka — a woman "dedicated" to the goddess Yellamma — who is essentially a sex worker; she was forced into this life by her poverty-stricken family, and ultimately she did the same to her daughters, later watching them die of AIDS.

Dalrymple, in his introduction, highlights a main theme of this book: India's recent social transformations have had a profound effect on spirituality. He explains, "For while the West often likes to imagine the religions of the East as deep wells of ancient, unchanging wisdom, in reality much of India's religious identity is closely tied to specific social groups, caste practices and father-to-son lineages, all of which are changing very rapidly as Indian society transforms itself at speed."

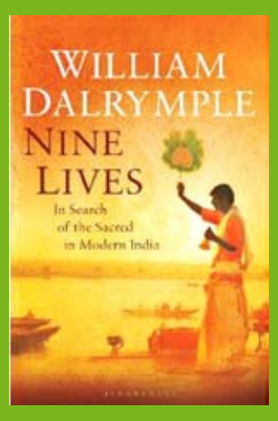
These tensions can manifest themselves in fascinating, and unpredictable, ways. Near Kolkata, for example, Dalrymple meets an ash-smeared Tantric sadhu living at a cremation ground, who cures human skulls to protect against evil spirits. The sadhu laments the family he left in his lay life: "'They are not spiritual, and probably don't even believe in God ... My niece is a professor, and her husband does electrocardiograms. My son is now an accountant with (the) Tata (company) ... But they reject the world I live in. I don't think I can ever explain it to him." While explaining, Dalrymple never passes judgment; instead, the reader is forced to personally reconcile this jarring generational shift.

There is Lal Peri, a female ascetic committed to the Sufism of Lal Shahbaz Qalander, in rural Sindh in Pakistan, defying sectarianism as her tradition draws from Hindu scriptures, yogic practices, as well as Islam. She was a refugee fleeing violence on more than one occasion, and Dalrymple writes, "The more I heard the details of her story, the more her life seemed to encapsulate the complex relationship of Hinduism with the different forms of South Asian Islam, swerving between hatred and terrible violence, on one hand, and love and extraordinary syncretism on the other."

Dalrymple notes that India's heterodox and pluralistic religious traditions are becoming subsumed by centralized, national-level notions of Hinduism. Yet, he still finds that "older India endures," as, for example, holy men continue to agonize over classical questions.

"The water moves on, a little faster than before, yet still the great river flows," Dalrymple writes about religion in India. "It is as fluid and unpredictable in its moods as it has ever been, but it meanders within familiar banks." Indeed, India's pluralistic religious traditions will continue to swirl, subside and sometimes even surge. And Dalrymple's "Nine Lives" has made that water more clear.

PUBLICATION NOTES



NINE LIVES: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED IN MODERN INDIA

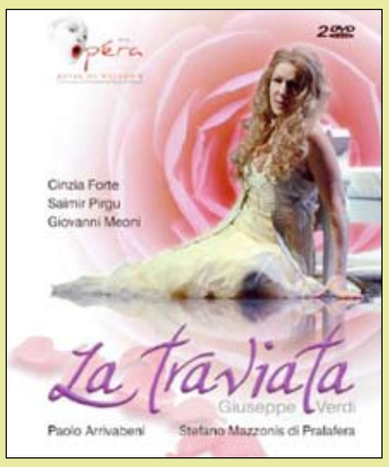
BY WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

276 PAGES

ALFRED A. KNOPF

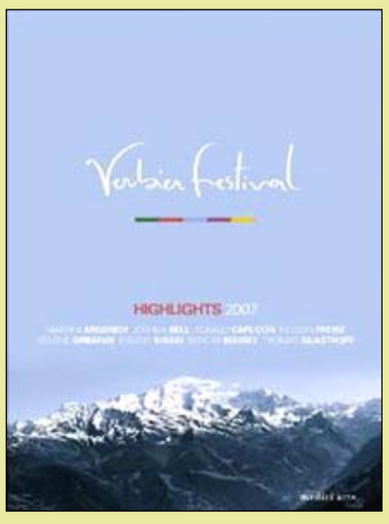
Classical DVD and CD reviews

IL TURCO IN ITALIA
Rossini
Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa
ARTHAUS 101391



LA TRAVIATA
Verdi
Opera Royal de Wallonie — Liege
DYNAMIC 33642

LA SONNAMBULA
Bellini
Bartoli, Florez, D'Arcangelo
DECCA 000289 478 1087 2 [CD]



VERBIER FESTIVAL
Highlights 2007
Various Artists
MEDICI ARTS 3078058

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The problem with Rossini's comic operas is that many listeners have been spoilt by familiarity with greater things. Once you know Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), Verdi's *Falstaff* or Strauss' *Rosenkavalier*, you realize what heights the mixture of high spirits and wistful melancholy can attain. Rossini's comedies, by contrast, sound like pure frivolity, and consequently appear superficial.

Nevertheless, the new *Il Turco in Italia* (The Turk in Italy) from the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa tries its best. The production is lively — though neither a character entering through the auditorium, nor a scene involving massed chairs, can be judged original — and reasonably colorful.

Myrto Papatanasiu as Fiorilla is the strongest soloist in an adequate, but nowhere outstanding, cast. Simone Aliamo is Selim (the Turk), Vincenzo Taormina the poet Prosdocimo, and Antonella Nappa sings Zaida, but as the opera progresses Papatanasiu's preeminence becomes indisputable. The big ensembles, as for instance the finale that ends Act One, are, however, notably effective.

This DVD deserves a measured welcome. The Genoa opera house is a newcomer to DVD offerings, and we must hope for more innovative productions from it in the future. The international competition in this field is, though, very intense.

La Traviata from the Opera Royal de Wallonie-Liege is another example of an acceptable production from a provincial opera house, in this case in Belgium, that nevertheless fails to compete with what the top rankers in the business can offer.

This version of *Traviata* has no obvious weak points, but it doesn't have any overwhelmingly strong ones either. Verdi's score, by contrast, offers strength after strength. I might well have enjoyed this production in the theater, but it doesn't merit the repeated viewings that the DVD format invites.

Neither Cinzia Forte as Violetta nor Saimir Pirgu as Alfredo thrill. Most effective, rather, is Giovanni Meoni as Germont.

When the CD of Bellini's opera *La Sonnambula* (The Sleep-walker) starring Cecilia Bartoli and Juan Diego Florez was first released, controversy erupted. Decca claimed it featured two of the greatest soloists alive and that this was the first recording to use period instruments. Detractors felt Bartoli's voice was manifestly unsuited to the title role.

I find it impossible to agree with those who praise this product. Bartoli has many and great virtues, but they're none of them suited to the role of Amina. She's a mezzo-soprano, and much of the music has apparently been lowered in pitch to accommodate her voice. Florez is indeed a distinctly incisive tenor, but his voice is the exact opposite in character to Bartoli's mellow tones. As for the period instruments, I suspect few listeners will notice much difference from the usual setup.

This pair of CDs has all the appearance of a confection — a commercial product worked on endlessly in an attempt to embellish something in reality doomed from the start. Bartoli counters her basic unsuitability for the role by elaborate vocal decoration, arguably in accordance with the practice in Bellini's day. The unfortunate result, to use an analogy with Mozart's *Figaro*, is of a Marcellina trying to be a Susanna. Her flustered orotund mezzo tones couldn't be further from the simple purity Bellini requires.

For comparison, just listen to the youthful Anna Moffo on the old mono, black-and-white DVD of Sonnambula [reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on March 8, 2007]. For all the more-than-wooden acting by the chorus of villagers, this Italian TV version is affecting and beautiful in a way this glossy new CD version fails to be. (I was unaware, incidentally, when reviewing this DVD that the singer in the minor role of the Notary had the distinction of having created the role of Pong in *Turandot* in its 1926 premier).

All in all, it seems that Bartoli has been exploited here. The accompanying promotional photos make her appear glamorous in a way she isn't, thereby masking her real, more amiable, qualities. A similarly artificial glossiness seems to have been applied to Bellini's opera as a whole.

So, three somewhat disappointing items this month. Luckily it's not necessary to end on a bleak note. A DVD of highlights from the 2007 Verbier Festival, released last year, arrives to save the day.

For some reason this festival, held every year in the Swiss Alps, attracts the finest artists in the profession. In 2007, for example, you had Martha Argerich, Evgeny Kissin, Mischa Maisky, Thomas Quasthoff, Andrew Davis and Joshua Bell, all of whom appear on this DVD. Here are riches indeed.

Highlights of the highlights are probably Kissin playing Horowitz's *Carmen Variations*, Joshua Bell and a very youthful orchestra in the last moment of Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*, two movements from Schumann's *Piano Quintet* (with Maisky as the cellist) and Argerich and Renaud Capucon playing the Allegro from Bartok's *Sonata for Violin and Piano No.1*.

This DVD goes to show that the most illustrious people doing what they do best can't, in the event, really be beaten.

Hardcover: UK

If it's broke, fix it

Escaping the grind of an office job, Matthew Crawford found satisfaction in blue-collar work

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

I once received some excellent medical advice from a professor of psychology in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When I contacted him again recently he informed me he was now living as a cabinet-maker in Maine. I was initially surprised, but then saw it as part of a wider pattern — the abandoning of mental and clerical work in favor of manual labor of some sort.

The author of *The Case for Working with Your Hands* has a doctorate in political philosophy but runs a bike repair shop. And motorbikes are deeply divisive objects in Western culture — maligned by the suburban middle-classes as vulgar symbols of unbridled male sexuality, but treasured by many of their owners as emblems of true independence and self-reliance.

Some time during the 1980s, writes Michael Crawford, US high schools stopped teaching "shop class" (automobile repair, woodworking, metal fabrication and the like) and started training students instead to be "knowledge workers," i.e. skilled with computers. This was a pity, Crawford argues, not only because in the midst of mass unemployment there's now a chronic labor shortage in the construction and repair industries, but also because manual work gives a deep pleasure that working with pen and paper, or computers, can never bestow.

After Crawford took his doctorate at the University of Chicago he worked in a Washington think-tank. "I was always tired," he says, "and honestly could not see the rationale for my being paid at all — what tangible goods or services was I providing to anyone?" After five months he quit and opened the bike shop.

Crawford goes out of his way to explain that he's not an aficionado of the "higher crafts." He's no Japanese sword-maker, claiming a higher spirituality from creating supremely fine hand-made products. Nor is he a wood-worker, like so many latter-day middle-class hippies who believe in the sanctity of working close to nature. By contrast, he's an advocate of the democracy of everyday trades, fixing the things that many people need, but which require someone with know-how to be able to put right.

Moreover, Crawford feels that the time is right for such a re-evaluation. The recent economic crisis has made people lose trust in a career on Wall Street, and hopefully made them reconsider the fundamental truth that "productive labor is the foundation of all prosperity." And anecdotal evidence suggests that American community colleges that take students who already have four-year degrees and train them in a marketable trade skill see 98 percent of their trainees getting jobs in the first year after graduating.

Indeed, the recent banking-led economic crisis sets the context for much of this book, as well as providing examples of what happens when businesses lose contact with the reality of the solid objects in which they are dealing.

Crawford relates how he worked as an electrician's helper when he was 15 and still remembers the pleasure he derived at the end of the day from flipping a switch "and there was light." (It's hard here not to recall the poet Pope's two-line verse epitaph on Isaac Newton. "Nature, and Nature's laws, lay hid in night. God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light" — all the more brilliant as Newton's specialism was optics).

The Case for Working with Your Hands is inevitably going to be compared to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It has to be said that there's no real comparison. This new book is much shorter, and anyway doesn't have the fictional allure and opportunities for a digressive inclusiveness Robert Persig provided for himself in his justly famous road narrative.

At one point Crawford cites Toqueville's prediction that Americans would become dependent on the "soft despotism" of what's nowadays sometimes called the "nanny state," while suggesting that today's outsized corporations are more of a threat than government itself. But he also refers to Toqueville's remedy for this situation: small enterprises that allow people to solve problems without recourse to corporate psychological manipulation.

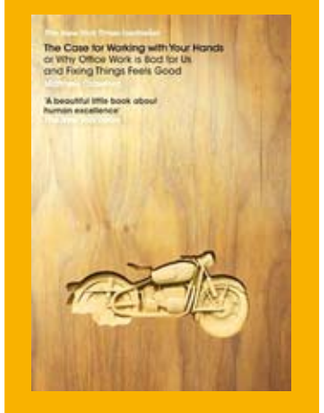
One member of a small technical "crew" can say to another "It's plumb and level — check it for yourself," whereas a member of a modern corporate marketing "team" can only assert his semi-independence from management-imposed ethics by "pinning Dilbert cartoons to his cubicle wall and watching *The Office* every Thursday night."

The point here is that office work often has no verifiable criterion available by which to judge if someone is working well or not. As a result, "speech codes, diversity workshops, and other forms of higher regulation" proliferate, leading to the spread of "a dull and confusing anxiety."

Crawford extends his dislike of the office ethos to computers — machines that have no inkling of things that practical men and women in many spheres of life often know by instinct. He also argues against Marx's idea of manual workers' "alienation" — that the object over which they have labored is "torn away" by the rich man who eventually buys it, leaving the worker "alienated" as a result. Why so? the author asks. Doesn't a furniture-maker want to see his furniture used, what use has he for 100 chairs, and so on.

This excellent book, published in the US as *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, ends with a caution against all revolutionary nostrums. The vision of a future in which economic antagonism has been abolished may blind us to the problem of how to live well here and now, one best solved by insisting on what human beings do best in a local context — such as making motorbikes purr and hum in harmony with the pulsations of the stars.

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE CASE FOR WORKING WITH YOUR HANDS (OR WHY OFFICE WORK IS BAD FOR US AND FIXING THINGS FEELS GOOD)

BY MATTHEW CRAWFORD

246 PAGES

VIKING