

BIGBOY'S SLAP NOIR

By Michael Ventura

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My trademark warning to anyone who hands me their hard-wrought manuscript: “Are you sure you want me to read this? ‘Cause I never fuck around about writing.”

For instance, in Los Angeles, during the years we partnered as screenwriters, Mr. James BigBoy Medlin wrote a solo script, a pet project of his own. We met to discuss it at a Pico Boulevard eatery near Twentieth Century Fox, a studio where, together, we’d endured assorted unpleasantnesses and a bit of excitement. My entire critique of Mr. Medlin’s script went like this: “Every good writer will one day write something that stinks. You don’t have to worry anymore, ‘cause you just wrote yours.”

So Mr. Medlin knew what he was getting into about three years ago when he sent me a novel. He knew I’d tell him what’s what, no matter what. I’m not that way about everything, but emphatically that way about writing.

(And I don’t usually call him Mr. Medlin. I call him Big, or Biggie, or Your Bigness, and even, on occasion, James, but this is official business, as you’ll see, so tonight he’s mostly Mr. Medlin.)

He sent me a thick manuscript. I loved the title – *Slap Noir* – and was terrified to read it. First, because the title announced that he attempted a story that was genuinely noir and also genuinely slapstick, and a writer has to be nuts to try that. Second, well – *Slap Noir* is a novel. See, it’s nothing to write a bad screenplay. Every screenwriter writes a few turkeys. Two, three, four months’ work down the tubes – have a few drinks and to hell with it. But a novel? A novel as long as Big’s manuscript? That’s two to four years’ effort. I know what it is to put a few years into a book and come up empty. For the next couple of years you walk around like you’ve been mugged – and you’re the one who mugged you.

Every first draft needs fixing; that’s to be expected. And Mr. Medlin has been a pro as long as I have. He knows his trade, so I anticipated something not bad and probably good. But, with a novel, just good isn’t good enough. A novelist who’s for real wants something special.

Something special is what I read. *Slap Noir* is like only itself.

Slap Noir is a mystery – and not. You care about who-done-it at first, but that’s not the point of the story until the end, when suddenly you care again and care very much. (And I, personally, didn’t know who-done-it until Mr. Medlin wanted me to know.)

Slap Noir is a comedy – and not. You literally laugh out loud over and over, but the final effect is, just as literally, chilling.

Slap Noir takes no sides – you might say it’s morally disorientating. You see the most heinous people through their own eyes, and, of course, in their own eyes they shine. No one is all good, no one is all bad, everyone is serious, everyone is funny, everyone knows something, nobody knows it all, and there are no heroes. Just people – people in a mid-Sixties West Texas oil town called Achilles, caught in a swirl of chaos that is no one’s and everyone’s fault.

And then there’s Mr. Medlin’s style. Verbally and structurally, he paints this complex landscape with no straight lines. Sometimes you don’t know the subject of a sentence

until you get to its end – and that’s quite a trick; I like to think my technique is pretty fine, but I can’t do that. Mr. Medlin often employs the passive voice – a great taboo in contemporary writing; the effect is an indirectness that can be very funny and/or cagey: A grizzled West Texas bullshitter who’ll tell all there is to tell but wants to make you wonder.

In short, I loved *Slap Noir* for how it jauntily defies all categories and is purely an expression of James BigBoy Medlin’s comedic, existential spectrum of compassion on the one end, horror on the other, and, in between, the longing look of a great clown – the look that says, “How can this all go on? And how can it not?”

Anyway, *Slap Noir* changed my life in a most concrete fashion. I suddenly envisioned a press – an imprint, as it used to be called – to publish works that are too funky for the bourgeois, too intellectual for the pulpy, too impolitic for the academic, too pulpy for the literary, too ornery for the Manhattan crowd and too dust-devilish for the Los Angeles crowd – with room for works that are too superbly quiet for this pointlessly noisy society. We call it LettersAt3amPress: e-books, print-on-demand, and whatever else we can pay for after rent, grub, cable, and whiskey. *Slap Noir* would be our first book. I wanted to personally publish Big’s novel.

Employing his favorite line in all of cinema, from Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, Mr. Medlin said: “Why not?”

At LettersAt3amPress, we – Jazmin Aminian and I – do not pay ourselves and take no profits. This press is a calling, not a business. Wages and profits, or a lack of profits, inevitably would make this a business and there goes all the fun. Every penny earned by our books, minus what’s owed to venders, goes directly to our authors.

To feel a calling is a beautiful thing. Like you’re in the right place, at the right time, doing what’s good for you to do. Wages a’plenty, I’d say.

What luxury: Given that I don’t profit, I can praise *Slap Noir* to the skies with impunity and integrity while letting you know that as of today *Slap Noir* is available on Kobo, Nook, iBook, and Amazon – and it looks really cool. For the future, LettersAt3amPress has five more authors in the pipeline so far: Karen Holden, Jo Carol Pierce, Guy Juke, Mark Fairfield, and myself – with more on the way. We’re serious. Stay tuned.

Back to the central subject at hand:

Slap Noir’s Achilles, Texas, is, by some uncanny coincidence, very like Odessa, Texas – the town where Mr. Medlin was raised. Recently I drove through Odessa for the first time.

Let me testify: I’ve driven from Waterville, Maine, to Tijuana, Mexico; from Key West, Florida, to Bellingham, Washington; from Ruidosa, Texas, to Butte, Montana – and many a town in between. But I have never seen any burg as bleak as Odessa. Ninety-nine thousand souls and the only structure of any size is a bank. Drive a highway overpass and all the view is miles and miles of scrubby desert dotted with oil wells.

Emailed to Big that night: “You have my profoundest and everlasting sympathies. I write you from Marfa, where I drove to meet up with Steve Erickson. ... US 385 turned into Andrews Highway turned into a street that began with a G and went right through Odessa ... and I thought: This town makes Lubbock look like Santa Monica.”

Big replied: “Now you been to Texas, boy. Marfa got them spooky lights. Odessa got sumthin’ scarier ... sumthin’ born of church, baptized in a honky tonk, and escaped from a fossil fuel pit of misconceptions. Did you see the thick dark cloud over Odessa? Smell

the sweet stench of rotten eggs and misguided good deeds? Did you see the wide roads running in both directions? Grant Avenue, gateway to redneck minimalism.”

Yet, you’ll find in *Slap Noir* that Mr. Medlin loves that forbidding town. He gives the place full credit for shaping who he is and he almost mournfully recognizes that he could not have become what he is had he stayed. When he makes fun, it’s never with scorn and never superiorly. He makes fun because it’s funny and it’s crazy and it’s sad that humans would set up shop as bleakly as they have in Odessa or anywhere.

Only a writer with Mr. Medlin’s skills and Mr. Medlin’s heart could find in that desolation the frailty, funniness, sweetness, obtuseness, and scariness, that makes the human being the damnedest creature on this planet.

Austin legend James BigBoy Medlin will sign his novel at the SXSW Bookstore Monday, March 10, 4:00pm. Austin Convention Center, Fourth Floor Ballroom, D Foyer.

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