

# C-Span explores history, politics through 'American Writers'

By Frazier Moore  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Call me Ishmael. Call *Moby Dick* a masterpiece.

Call C-Span if you're miffed that **Herman Melville** isn't part of its ambitious new project, *American Writers: A Journey Through History*. (Sorry, *Moby* fans: After heated discussion, Melville was harpooned.)

C-Span, which mainly fulfills its public-affairs mission with nonstop coverage of Beltway business, is busting loose for this *Journey*.

Every week through December, one or more of 46 American writers — some famous, some obscure — will serve as the jumping-off point for a look at American history, from the Pilgrim experience through the Vietnam War.

This journey is more than metaphorical. *American Writers* will roam the nation, with each program airing live from a historic site somehow tied to that week's featured scribe or scribes.

Today, the tour begins at Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, Mass., where the 1620 Mayflower Compact of **Gov. William Bradford** is the focus. (This and subsequent two-hour programs begin at 9 a.m., repeated the next Friday at 8 p.m.)

C-Span's list is not meant to be



**Mark Twain**, circa 1904, is among 46 writers in the series.

an honor roll of belletrists, nor is the series intended as a literary salon.

"It's a way to look at American history through the lens of writers who either shaped the course of our nation, influenced it, chronicled it, or reflected upon it," executive producer **Mark Farkas** says.

As usual with C-Span, callers are invited to contribute to the

dialogue.

Each of the 38 programs, many of them moderated by **Susan Swain**, the network's executive vice president, or founder **Brian Lamb**, will gather scholars and other guests to help place the work and writers in historical context. Providing physical context will be the on-location site — be it founding father **Thomas Jefferson's** Monticello estate or the Marina Del Rey, Calif., site of 20th-century objectivist **Ayn Rand's** institute.

*Journey* is C-Span's fourth historical series, but it introduced a new challenge for its producers. Unlike two years ago, when the network worked from fixed source material for its 41-week series on American presidents, "for the current project, we made our own list," Swain says.

As a Melville devotee, she was among those on the selection committee who fought to have him and *Moby Dick* included. But the collective will of this group and of C-Span's consultants decided otherwise: However distinguished as a storyteller, Melville wasn't a major player in the American narrative.

Choosing a writer to represent World War II triggered another round of give-and-take. Was **Joseph Heller** the signal voice, satirizing

war's absurdities in *Catch-22*? Or fellow novelist **Norman Mailer**, author of the gritty *The Naked and the Dead*?

No, the choice was war correspondent **Ernie Pyle**, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper columns were collected in the 1943 volume *Here Is Your War*.

Unlike **Ernest Hemingway** or **Benjamin Franklin** or **Mark Twain** or **Sojourner Truth**, not all of C-Span's writers are household names.

On July 9, the chosen writer isn't technically even a writer. **Black Elk**, a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe who fought in the Battle of Little Big Horn, recounted his life story to the man who wrote the 1932 book *Black Elk Speaks*.

Swain hopes the audience will join her as she hits the books that chart C-Span's journey — and will argue with her about them. She says: "We're trying to encourage a healthy debate in this country."

**Will Katie ditch "Today"?** **Katie Couric**, or at least her representatives, are doing a lot of talking about talk these days.

Her agent is expected soon to meet with people at Warner Bros. about the possibility of her hosting a daytime talk show. It would be the latest in a series of meetings during the last year concerning



**Sojourner Truth**, circa 1863. Not all the writers are as well-known.

the future of the *Today* show cohost.

What's unknown is whether Couric is really interested in breaking free from the morning schedule, or if this talk is an effort to extract something extra from NBC, to which she's under contract until mid-2002.

"I don't think you need to play counteroffer games a year and a half in advance," said **Alan Bell**,

head of Freedom Broadcasting, which owns eight stations.

Bell said he would love to see Couric in a syndicated series, thinking that, given the right format, producer and distributor, the show would be a hit.

Says **Bill Carroll** of Katz TV, a firm that advises stations on programming: "She certainly has the following, and she certainly has the personality that wears well day after day. But in the end, you never know for sure."

Couric is part of the No. 1 show in morning television, a show that allows her to interview heads of state, celebrities, and other newsmakers on a regular basis. For that, she gets upward of \$10 million a year. Being the host of a daytime talk show could double her income, experts said.

Earlier this year, *Today's* former executive producer **Jeff Zucker** became the head of NBC Entertainment. Zucker and Couric were friends and allies on the show, and his absence may have her thinking about something new. Also, it has been months since Zucker left, and the network has yet to name a full-time executive producer, which might affect her decision.

The New York Daily News contributed to this report.

Review *Dance*



TOM CARAVAGLIA

The Lula Washington Dance Theater's program on Friday night was based on African American sources, including some puzzling musical choices.

# Lula Washington fails to warm the audience

Review *Theater*

## A slap in the face might be more fun

By Douglas J. Keating  
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

A man is coming off a bad patch in his personal life, so he runs off and joins the circus. He doesn't have any circus skills, so he becomes a clown that the other clowns slap around for laughs and is referred to as "The One Who Gets Slapped."

That was the title Russian playwright Leonid Andreyev gave to the piece he wrote in 1915. The Vagabond Acting Troupe, presenting the play at the 2nd Stage at the Adrienne, gives its adaptation the more contemporary title *Slapped!* But whatever it is called, you might need a periodic slap in the face yourself to keep focused on this tedious play.

The true identity of the runaway-turned-clown is never revealed, but it is hinted that either he or the circumstances that forced him to leave home (which we eventually do learn) would be familiar to all if they were. For the traveling circus, which is performing in a French city, he adopts the clown-name Primo, and immediately becomes embroiled in the personal conflicts and romances of the troupe.

Zinida, who tames both lions and men to do her will, sets her sights

### Slapped!

Written by Leonid Andreyev, translated by Akiva Fox, adapted by Aileen McCulloch, directed by McCulloch and Ty Furman, settings and lights by Joe Karoly, costumes by McCulloch.

**The cast:** Rob Rosiello, Kerri Slavin, Leonard Kelly, K. Richardson, Steve Lippe, Mike Fallon, Jason Stockdale, Christian Lisak, Doug Thomas, Claire Golden, Ephraim Lopez, Kristen Schier.

**Playing at:** 2nd Stage at the Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St., through March 25. Tickets are \$15. Information: 215-563-4330.

sonages as Lenin, Rasputin and Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm reflected in the characters, and, according to the play's program, Primo and Consuella "are thought to represent all that Andreyev thought beautiful about pre-revolutionary Russia: the innocence and the intellect."

If you are not a Russian alive in 1915, this subtext is, of course, meaningless.

Aileen McCulloch adapted *Slapped!* from a translation by Akiva Fox. She directs it with Ty Furman, and as Vagabond's managing artistic director, she scheduled it. Somewhere in the process she might have considered whether a



Kerri Slavin is Consuella and Michael J. Fallon is Bezano in "Slapped," an adaptation of a 1915 Russian play, at the 2nd Stage at the Adrienne.

**"15 MINUTES' IS EXCITING, UNFILTERED FURY!"**

WE'D LIKE TO SAY THAT WHAT WE'RE SEEING COULD NEVER, EVER HAPPEN, BUT IF WE'RE HONEST WE SIMPLY CAN'T!

— Kenneth Turan, LOS ANGELES TIMES

robert deniro

edward burns

