

Arts & Entertainment

Mountainside Author Benford Probes Princess Diana's Death

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

MOUNTAINSIDE - The mystery and intrigue surrounding the death of Princess Diana continue to make headlines nearly a decade after her death.

Just this month, a new study of DNA confirmed the blood alcohol level of her driver, Henri Paul, had three times the French legal limit, essentially putting to rest the idea that the Princess was murdered.

In his new book, "To Kill a Princess: The Diana Plot," Mountainside author Timothy B. Benford, examines the conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death by taking the facts and weaving them into a fictional account of the tragedy.

"To Kill a Princess" evolved from a previous book, "Royal Family Quiz and Fact Book," which Mr. Benford published in 1987.

"I had made a lot of contacts while writing the Royal Family book, and I stayed in touch with them," he explained, adding that when he started writing about Princess Diana, he knew whom to contact for information.

Although "To Kill a Princess" is primarily a fictional story, it does contain a strong nonfiction component. For example, of the approximately 200 characters that appear in the book, less than 30 are fictional.

According to the author, the books' fiction keeps pace with the real events. "Every quote in the book attributed

to a real person was truly said," continued Mr. Benford.

"However, I wove the real-life information into the story in such a way that it is difficult to tell where the facts end and the fiction begins."

Mr. Benford has his own idea about why there has been so much controversy surrounding Princess Diana's death, which he compares to that of President Kennedy.

"Sometimes when an important person dies, the only way to come to terms with the death is by looking for a conspiracy," he explained.

"There are no conspiracy theories for insignificant people," he continued. "The scale is unbalanced."

The author, who is originally from Bayonne, has lived in Mountainside since 1974. He has served the community as a councilman, police commissioner and a member of United Way.

Although Mr. Benford began his writing career as a newspaper travel writer, he admits he never took a writing course, and calls his talent "self-taught."

His articles have appeared in *New York Times*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Caribbean Travel & Life*, *New Jersey Monthly* and many others in the U.S., Canada and Australia.

Mr. Benford is the author of a number of nonfiction books, including "Righteous Carnage: The List

Murders," which he co-wrote with James P. Johnson.

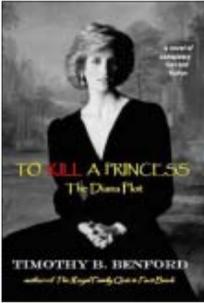
His other nonfiction books tackle the subjects of World War II, and the Space program. He has also written two novels: "Hitler's Daughter" and "The Ardennes Tapes." "Hitler's Daughter" has been made into a movie.

He often works on two different books at the same time, admitting that "two different subjects keep me fresh."

Although Mr. Benford is busy at work on a new project, he did not reveal what it is.

"I have a long list of books I want to write," is all he would say.

For more information about Mr. Benford and his books, visit his website at timbenford.com.



Westfield Symphony Orchestra Sings in the New Year in Style

By SUSAN M. DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD - New Year's Eve can be a lonely night.

Audience members at the Westfield Symphony Orchestra's (WSO) "American Songbook," however, couldn't feel lonely while being surrounded by old, familiar musical numbers from Broadway shows of the last 40 years.

Conductor David Wroe started with the familiar if not overdone "Another Op'nin', Another Show" from Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*. Adding to the lively orchestral rendition was a vocal quartet of professional singers: soprano Marguerite Willbanks, alto Milla Ilieva, tenor David Gagnon and baritone Marcus DeLoach.

Utilizing Broadway hits from Lerner, Rogers and Hammerstein, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and a host of other traditional lyricists/song writers, Mr. Wroe's program was warm and inviting.

Unfortunately, Mr. Wroe's stiff, rather

long narration between numbers became laborious. During the second half of the program, however, he took his wife's advice (given during intermission, he confessed) to "loosen up!"

Ms. Willbanks and Mr. Gagnon delivered "We Kiss in a Shadow" from *The King and I* with intensity and passion. The vibrant tenor's voice fairly soared on the high notes' crescendo and was matched in volume and rich quality with the stunning soprano's instrument.

An incredible flute accompaniment—which floated and cascaded over the notes in that number—was worth the price of admission.

In the hour-and-a-half long program, familiar classics predominated, but wisely were punctuated with some less frequently heard songs such as

"Melinda" from Lerner's *On a Clear Day*, "Losing My Mind" from Sondheim's *Follies* and "Crossword Puzzle" from Shire and Maltby's *Starting Here, Starting Now*.

Absolutely delightful in presentation, "Puzzle" was a showcase for Ms. Willbanks' vocal playful side and acting ability.

The WSO's early curtain of 7 p.m. served as a two-edged sword: audience members could enjoy the concert and still put in an appearance at a New Year's Eve Party. Unfortunately, the early time allowed for folks to bring very young children.

One cherub caused a distraction for those in the balcony. The only salvation was the state-of-the-art sound sys-

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Susan M. Dougherty for The Westfield Leader and The Times
ALL TOGETHER NOW...At the conclusion of the Westfield Symphony Orchestra's "The American Songbook" on New Year's Eve, Maestro David Wroe invites the audience to sing "Auld Lang Syne" with Milla Ilieva, David Gagnon, Marguerite Willbanks and Marcus DeLoach.

Community Players Season Continues with Angel Street

WESTFIELD - Director Gordon Wiener (Edison) has the cast in final rehearsals for the Westfield Community Players (WCP) production of Patrick Hamilton's Victorian thriller *Angel Street* opening Saturday evening January 6 at 8 p.m.

The show continues Friday and Saturday evenings January 12, 13, 19 and 20 in the theater at 1000 North Avenue West in Westfield. First produced in London, this play was the basis for the film *Gaslight*.

For the Manningshams who live on Angel Street in London, all appears peaceful and serene from the outside. Within, Mr. Manningham is slowly torturing his wife into insanity under the guise of kindness. It takes the tenacious inspector Rough from Scotland Yard to help Mrs. Manningham as he investi-

gates a murder committed 15 years ago in the house on Angel Street.

Real life spouses Mark and Syndi Szabo of Parlin play the Manningshams, while Lee Wittenberg (Newark) is Inspector Rough of Scotland Yard. The household is completed with maids Jackie Weiner (Westfield) and Jamie Bodo (Piscataway). Produced by Kay Macrae (Westfield), Lynn Lampariello is the Stage Manager, Bill McMeekan (Scotch Plains) was construction manager and Bob Murray (Plainfield) is technical director.

If interested, call the box office at (908) 232-1221 for reserved seating at \$15 per ticket. Non-members must prepay tickets with reservations. Note that on the benefit performance of January 12, WCP membership cards will not be honored. On those nights, tickets are available from the sponsoring organizations.

Raagini Restaurant Launches Art Gallery

MOUNTAINSIDE - Union County's Indian restaurant Raagini has launched an art gallery. Sonia and Pankaj Jain manage Indigo Arts, the first and only Indian art gallery in New Jersey.

The first exhibition will take place on Saturday, January 6, at noon, and every first Saturday of the month onwards.

Indigo Arts presents a collection of oil paintings by various Indian artists such as Rajesh Yadav, Lokesh Soni, Khush Mali, Krishan Gupta, Anu, Seema and others.

These paintings are categorized into various categories such as monuments, religious symbols, abstract and traditional themes.

Raagini is located on 1085 Route 22, East in Mountainside.

BOE Congratulates Band, Color Guard

SCOTCH PLAINS - On December 21, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education (SP-F BOE) presented the 131 members of the Scotch Plains Fanwood High School Marching Band and Color Guard with a congratulatory resolution commemorating the band's state championship win at the 2006 United States Scholastic Band competition for group 6A.

SP-F BOE member Linda Nelson presented the resolution that was unanimously approved by the board. Schools Superintendent Margaret Hayes then presented each band section with copies of the resolution. The evening concluded with a small reception for the band and their families.



BANDING TOGETHER...Band members' families honor them with a standing ovation.

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POPCORN™ Rocky Balboa: The Winner and still Underdog

By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
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Who said you can't go on and on...and on? Tarzan is still swinging out there somewhere. Mr. Sherlock Holmes is ready whenever the game is afoot. And James Bond has just acquired a fresh makeover as well as a whole new audience.

Rocky Balboa, merely the sixth film in the series that started with *Rocky* in 1976, reaffirms there's always room on the silver screen for our legendary folk heroes. Especially if they romantically embody the spirit that captured our imagination in the first place. Which is what Sylvester Stallone's Italian Stallion does this time out...absolutely.

Granted, the franchise, like its blue-collar gladiator, lost its way somewhere between *Rocky II* (1979) and *Rocky V* (1990). Old Rocky had to go through the motions. The oddball promotions, the hardships, the fleeting glory.

However, now pushing 60, the pugilist-turned-restaurateur sees anew the really important questions. And, through that odd visceral process only he fully fathoms, Rocky figures the answers can once again be found in the center of a boxing ring.

Outlandish, indeed. But we'll throng nevertheless to see if a man three score and somewhat wiser than an opponent half his age can win just a little vicarious redemption for us all. Hey, it's human nature.

Which is pretty much the angle heavyweight champ Mason Dixon's moneymen are playing. It's the nostalgia/novelty card, not too unlike the one Apollo Creed dealt in 1976. The one that wound up making Rocky a household name.

You see, the undefeated champ, effectively portrayed by Antonio Tarver, is a powerhouse alright. So much so, in fact, that no one on the horizon stands a chance of besting him. And since the arrogant boxer is universally disliked, fans aren't going to pay good money unless they think the sullen braggart has a chance of being toppled.

So, here's the next best thing...a moment, if not several rounds, of dreaming the impossible dream. And, if the gloriously unthinkable should occur, well, we dare not even hope for such a miracle.

All of which is what places us moviegoers right at ringside, willing participants in this indulgent fantasy. Throwing reason to the wind, we're in his corner, card-carrying AARP member or not.

But just in case we had our doubts, the scenes leading up to Rocky's decision make a rather compelling argument. Remember, this is the people's champ. In the twilight of his life, his concerns, disappointments and aspirations are our own, only a little more so.

Unlike the complaint shared by many folks his age, Rocky is hardly invisible. But he is a bit of a ghost and a tad of a cliché, right down to a son disgruntled by the shadow his once illustrious dad still casts.

A little time spent with the former champ as he rummages around in a life haunted with memories finds him tableside, regaling patrons with recaps of his more memorable bouts. He populates the cozy place with old pals who need a job. And at every opportunity, he scoots out to visit his wife's grave.

In a lifetime of endless wounds, Adrian's passing has proved the unkindest cut of all...the one that just won't heal. Not helping matters is the gulf that has recently developed between him and Rocky, Jr. (Milo Ventimiglia). Despite his entreaties, the kid just keeps avoiding him.

Dealing with these issues, Stallone the director/writer invokes his magical gift of dispensation. Hardly another filmmaker can lay on the schmaltz so thick and still be taken seriously, even if it is for only 90 minutes at a clip.

It is a simple, meat 'n' potatoes eloquence, ensconced within the engaging, Runyonesque society he's feathered his Rocky chronicles with over the years. It makes for a convincing one-two punch.

Along for the ride to again help connect the past with the present is seriocomically embittered Paulie (Burt Young). Increasingly loony, the brother-in-law is still working in the big meat freezer and still looking to work the angles.

Less familiar but of pivotal essence is Little Marie, nicely portrayed by Geraldine Hughes. You might remember, she's the wisecracking teenager Rocky lectures while he walks home in the first episode. Now all grown up, a single parent and struggling, she has come to appreciate our streetwise philosopher's wisdom. A connection forms.

Here, Stallone treads carefully. Adrian has been elevated to sainthood. We don't want any sacrilege.

Still, it has been a few years. The guy deserves a break. The fight nears. Tension builds. And only one thing is important. How will things go for Rocky Balboa this go-round, both in and out of the ring?

Rocky Balboa, rated PG, is a Columbia Pictures release directed by Sylvester Stallone and stars Sylvester Stallone, Geraldine Hughes and Antonio Tarver. Running time: 102 minutes

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