

Art; In the mystery zone; Taking the familiar and flipping it around is the specialty of backward- and forward-thinking Terry Allen. Just don't call him an artist.

David Pagel. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Mar 7, 2004.

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Ever since Impressionism, family values and contemporary art have mixed like oil and water. Artists gladly leave such buzzwords and issues to politicians. And politicians won't touch contemporary art with a 10-foot pole. Together, the opposing groups fuel the fires of divisiveness that make the present so sectarian.

Not Terry Allen, a multitasking master of multitasking who has no respect for unreasonable divisions, lazy habits or conventional thinking. A critically acclaimed songwriter, musician, playwright, filmmaker, sculptor and installation artist, Allen is a gentle malcontent whose love of life's complexity is matched only by the fearlessness with which he fights anything that gets in his way -- including himself.

For the last 10 years, the 60-year-old artist has been working on "Dugout," a multimedia project based on his memories of the stories his parents told in the 1940s and '50s, when he was growing up in Lubbock, Texas. Allen's father was a retired St. Louis Browns catcher who converted a Pentecostal church into an arena for acts he brought to town, including professional wrestlers, amateur boxers and rock 'n' rollers such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Allen's mother was a musician who played hotels and honky-tonks all across the Southwest, sometimes loading her son into the family car for her weekly gig at the La Paz in Santa Fe, N.M.

"I was an only child," says Allen, who today lives in Santa Fe, "so I grew up listening to old ballplayers and old musicians tell stories. They told incredible stories about the turn of the century and the first airplanes. Those stories were so alien to anything I knew as a kid. That's what this 'Dugout' piece really comes from."

An early incarnation of "Dugout" came in the form of a 1994 audio drama on National Public Radio. Since then it has grown to include "Dugout I," an exhibition of stage-like tableaux and 40 collaged drawings at L.A. Louver Gallery; "Dugout II (Hold On to the House)," a video installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art; and "Dugout III (Warboy and the Backboard Blues)," a multimedia play presented by L.A. Theatre Works at the Skirball Cultural Center. Also, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Institute of Art and Culture will feature a conversation Monday at 7:30 p.m. with Allen and his wife, actress Jo Harvey Allen (who performs in "Dugout III"), along with critic Dave Hickey.

The six tableaux featured in "Dugout I" all include old wooden chairs, many of which are set on weathered planks that resemble the back porches on homes in small towns across America. Such dusty mementos as an ancient baseball, an unstrung mitt and a broken wineglass suggest poignant trips down memory lane

unsung hit and a broken wineglass suggest poignant trips down memory lane, but Allen throws a wrench into the machinery of easy sentimentality by including the garish glow of neon lights, some menace (a taxidermied wolf), plenty of comedy (a stuffed goose) and a palpable love of tales too tall to be believed but too harrowing to be forgotten.

"Dugout II" amplifies the confusion between fact and fiction. Built around the frame of an archetypal house suspended from the museum's ceiling, it includes even more family souvenirs, over the surfaces of which DVD players project looped videos accompanied by haunting soundtracks.

Despite the intimate subject matter of "Dugout," it shares little with straightforward autobiography. Allen says, "It's not really about my folks. In a way, they ceased being people as soon as I started making the piece. They become fictional character vehicles to carry the stories. They become climates. And they go through a series of phases, of changes and contradictions, interacting, moving in to collide with one another and becoming a whole other bundle of climates.

"[Dugout] is very much about a climate that feels mysterious. I think about my childhood in those times and the extreme paranoia. Fear of Communists. Polio. Thalidomide. At the time it was just normal. But as soon as you get some distance on it, you start being amazed by it."

When Allen was born in 1943 his mother was nearly 40 and his father nearly 60. "It was like being raised by grandparents. The distance between the time I was coming up and what I heard them talking about, about their childhoods, was so great, like two separate planets. I remember being mystified by it and wondering about it."

Well, almost. "But their world was a real different world from mine." Back in theirs, "before the bomb, a farm could be a world. A little town could be a whole world. But once that bomb got out, it was the world. Everybody was under the same umbrella.

"So ['Dugout'] is kind of a stacking of stories. The first stack was dealing with that other time, that earlier America." Allen's voice deepens and slows. Ever the skeptic, he refrains from over-romanticizing the past. "It wasn't about innocence. Oh, no. Because it's never been innocent in America. Never."

He describes the pre-nuclear era of his folks as being free of today's insatiable appetite for psychoanalytic navel-gazing. "A lack of neurosis" defined it. "People pretty much played the hand they were dealt. They weren't so caught up in expectations. And demands. And what people seem to be consumed with now."

As an example of that time's fatalism, he turns to his father. "Like my dad, he had his tonsils out with a hot poker."

'Touchy ground'

The details come in broken bits of sentences, but as matter-of-fact and untraumatic as any list: "Because he was dying. Living on a farm. And this doctor that came out said, 'We got to get those tonsils out.' So they held him down and stuck a hot poker down his throat and burnt those tonsils out.

"And that was something that was expected. People just accepted it." Allen explains, "I built a whole fiction around this story and put it into the piece. But the story itself had a huge impact on me, hearing it as a kid."

Pausing, he reflects: "This is real touchy ground. Everybody has folks. Everybody has troubles. Anything you do, you try to make it more than that, beyond your deal."

Allen would never say "that's what art is all about" because he'll do just about anything to avoid calling himself an artist -- or describing what he makes as art. He's far more comfortable with humble words like "work" and sensible activities like "making things."

"You know," he says, "you get involved with something you're curious about, and you start making things. I never think in terms of, 'Well, does this have some kind of political implication?' I don't think that way. A work usually tells you a lot of the things it wants you to get to. So you kind of travel with it.

"I've never thought of it as a business. I always thought it was a choice you make about how you're going to live your life. It's a matter of necessity. No matter whatever circumstances you're in, you make your work. That's what you do. 'Professional artist' might be the ultimate oxymoron.

"Because art-making is not about stopping. It's about learning. But I don't feel any different now when I confront an empty something when I'm trying to make something than I did when I was in school. It's just as spooky. And just as huge. And weird. I don't think in that sense you learn. Over time, what you do learn is habits. And habits, you try to get rid of. You try to get through those habits into that mystery zone where things happen. Otherwise you're just knockin' out product. You're a 'professional artist.'"

In this fertile world, stories beget more stories. When Allen falls under its spell, they spin faster and faster.

"I remember when my dad died. Right before he died, he called me into the room and offered me his business. I was, like, 14 at the time. He said, 'OK, I've made a good living at promoting wrestling. We can put it in a trust and wait till you're 21.'

"And, man, being a wrestling promoter was not on my priority list," Allen says, laughing. "I basically told him that. And he was fine with it. "Twenty years later, I'm doing a theater piece that includes actors and wrestlers and takes place in an arena. I went to a wrestling promoter, an old guy with a warehouse full of old memorabilia, photos of Lil' Beaver and Gorgeous George. I remembered my dad's office. And when we were rehearsing, it dawned on me that I was doing exactly

what my dad had done -- I was putting on this event with wrestlers for an audience. I had made this weird big circle."

The stories Allen returns to are not about the past. They're about the present. He's not a historian or a maker of documentaries but a storyteller whose tall tales are parables that entertain and leave viewers free to glean whatever wisdom suits them.

Allen looks back at his own thoughts. "Thirty years ago, I thought that in America, motion was holy, not the destination. I don't think that's true anymore. I think it was true maybe in the '50s, maybe in the '60s. It had been almost a beatnik thing -- you just drive, go. But I think it's all about destination now. You get there as quick as you can. It's all about achieving. About so much this, so much that, so much whatever. The mansion is better than the starter mansion. It's not so much about the moving, the going, the getting there. Which is what life is. I mean, go ahead and kill yourself. You shorten the trip."

As an artist, Allen doesn't go anywhere directly, preferring to work slowly, in big swooping cycles or circles that take more and more in as they ripple out into the world. And his works don't take viewers anywhere quickly: Favoring slow reads, they're filled with details to be savored, conundrums to be mulled and thoughts to be thunk.

Allen puts it like this: "Everybody's got some richness in their past that they're trying to cover up. People will always have interesting stories. That's just our nature. But maybe the idea of what an interesting story is is going to be totally different."

Maybe it already is.