

Water, Water

David Lawrence's many fans were surprised when he began performing his monologue, *Water, Water*, which ran six months Off Broadway before becoming a surprise hit on DVD. It showed that the popular actor had a subtle and sardonic genius and a depth of feeling that few fans and even fewer critics suspected. In his monologue, David Lawrence rants, "You know what I love about being a movie star? The money." And then, after a wink and a dramatic pause, "You know what I hate about it? Just about every damn thing else."

The audience laughs. On cue or spontaneously, it's hard to tell. Or is it canned laughter? The camera zooms in for a close-up. David runs his hand across his closely-cropped hair and says with a strong Southern accent (just a trace of Cajun), "Jesus, man. If y'all think you'd like to be a movie star, let me tell you, it ain't all it's cracked up to be." And he winks wickedly at the camera while projected behind him are films of David with his girlfriend, the actress Jasmine Jones. The obvious implication is that if making it with Jasmine Jones is a fringe benefit of being a movie star, then being a movie star is the greatest gig on earth, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

The montage quickly flashes a love scene from their film *The Witness*, followed by a photo of them speeding in his Jaguar and a blurred shot of them skinny-dipping in the surf. David and Jasmine met on his first picture, and the gossip rags have dogged their every move since. They're hot in the tabloids. They're together, they're not together, she's moving in with him, she wants to have his baby, they split up, he's seen with another hot young movie star, now they're back together.

David has three smash hit movies to his credit, *The Witness*, *Travlin' Light* and *Cold Justice*. In all three films he is the lovable but somewhat bumbling Southern lawyer Raymond Moon, who wins his cases by sheer good luck and gets the girl in the end. Teenage girls idolize David for his rugged looks and older women for his quiet manner. David says he doesn't like Hollywood parties, and he doesn't like going on talk shows, and he doesn't like reporters and photographers. But most of all he hates that the roles he plays are not the roles he envisioned when he studied acting in college. He wanted to do serious drama on Broadway. So far he hasn't been able to realize that dream, but he feels he has come close with his monologue.

In the monologue he talks a little bit about his life as a movie star, but mostly it's his story of growing up in the little town of Freedom in the bayou country near the Gulf of Mexico. As soon as the DVD hit the stores, David's mother bought a copy. (He had told her he would send her an advance copy, but he never did, and she wasn't willing to wait. "That boy would forget his own wedding if he ever had one," she liked to tell anyone who would listen, "and God knows I wish he would—have a wedding, that is, not forget it.") Shelly Lawrence didn't like the idea of her only son living in sin, although even she would be the first to admit that concept was old fashioned.

The whole Lawrence family plus David's old high school sweetheart, Sue Ellen Patterson, gather together to watch the DVD of *Water, Water*. There's David's father, Earl Ray, called Pop by almost everyone. Seventy years old and still strong, but nothing like in his youth when he lifted barrels of beer and loaded them on a flatbed truck, Pop is a magisterial figure with waves of silver hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee. He stretches his six-foot-six frame in an old recliner in front of the TV. Seated next to him is his wife, David's mother, Shelly, who at five-foot-four looks like a child next to Earl Ray. Seated on the couch and sharing a bowl of popcorn are David's beautiful sister Melissa and his not-quite-as-beautiful sister Mary, with Sue Ellen between them with the popcorn bowl perched on her lap. The three of them look enough alike that people

often mistake them for sisters. All three are tall and statuesque with voluptuous figures and regal manners. Melissa is by far the most striking, but she works at it, always looking her best, even when relaxing with family. Her hair is thick and brushed to a lustrous sheen. Even now she's wearing lipstick and mascara, diamonds around her neck and on her fingers, gray cotton hip huggers that cling to her ass, and a little white tank top. When she gets up to go into the kitchen for a drink tantalizing bits of a colorful tattoo can be seen on the small of her back, and when she sits back down more hints of skin art peek out from her deep cleavage.

Sue Ellen's style is more conventional business casual, looking like she's just come from a board meeting but has shed her jacket. Her hair is shoulder length and she wears glasses. A loose blouse hides much of a figure that in the right clothes could rival Melissa's.

Of the three, Mary is the most casual. Dressed in ripped jeans and a simple plaid blouse, just as she was while cleaning house and cooking dinner that afternoon, she obviously feels no need to impress anyone.

Sprawled on an easy chair with his legs thrown across the arm is Mary's no-count husband, Buddy Boudreau. (It's Mary herself who insists on referring to him as no-count, usually following up with variations on the refrain: "but I love him nevertheless. He's like a bad puppy that's always piddling on the floor but he's so damn cute you can't stay mad at him. Ya know what I mean?")

Perched on the rug on their bellies with feet kicking in air and hands cupped in chins are Mary and Buddy's pre-teen daughters who are the envy of every kid at school because they are David Lawrence's nieces. Of course that envy is somewhat baseless because Patricia and Rhonda have never even met their famous uncle.

David opens the monologue with a quote from *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;

Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.
 The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

The girls go “Eeeych!”

David says, “Can you picture it? Dying of thirst with water all around, but you can’t drink it because it’s salt water. It’s a metaphor I guess. That’s what it was like growing up in Freedom. Both metaphorically and literally. There was water all around. Bayous, bays and creeks. And no one could tell the difference between the bayous and the bays or the creeks and the rivers or the gulf and the sound. It was just water, water, water—one body of water flowing ceaselessly into another. There was salt water, brackish water, fast-running water and stagnant water, mosquito- and snake-infested water, the chlorinated water of the swimming pool that seared my eyes like sausage in a pan. And there was so much rain. Flash floods, electrical storms, hurricanes. Thank God or Grandpa Lawrence, we lived on top of the only high spot in town. It was a manmade hill on the precipice of a manmade cliff on the banks of Little Bay. Granted, our hilltop fortress was not exactly the Matterhorn. We were like maybe fifteen feet above the water, but we were sort of kings of the mountain in our neck of the woods. The broad sunroom on the back of our house overlooked the water. If the house had been ten feet closer to the edge of the cliff, I could have done a swan dive off the back porch and into the bay.

“I lived through two hurricanes and I don’t know how many flash floods. The last one they said was the wrath of God. People down there really believed that. Like God spends all day sitting around thinking what he can do to mess with a bunch of rednecks and Cajuns. I’m sure that at least seventy or eighty percent of the people down there believed that last big storm, the one when I was in high school, was God’s punishment for our sinful ways.”

Melissa says, "You tell 'em, David."

"He's right, you know," Sue Ellen pipes in. "He's got us pegged. And I remember that storm. Boy, do I ever! People thought it was the end of the world."

"Don't I know it." Mary puts her two cents in. "And I swear to God old Brother Fox down at Redemption Baptist, he still regrets that we survived that flood, and he just can't wait for whatever God's gonna throw our way next."

After enjoying a good laugh at the fundamentalists, they turn their attention back to the TV. David says, "If God was punishing us for our sins, it was the sin of hypocrisy, the sin of self-righteousness. Those are the real sins. But what the hypocrites down there thought of as sin was sex outside the bounds of holy matrimony (as if they weren't all doing it) and race mixing—mongrelization they call it—and homosexuality. There ain't nothing so devilish as a hairdresser. So sex, or shall we say unconventional sex, that's the big one, the numero uno sin. Murder? Nah, that's not really so bad, not if you have a good enough reason, anyway. Let someone screw with your wife or break into your home and you've got every reason to blast his lights out. But start screwing around with the wrong gender or the wrong race, and you bring on the big winds and high water. Sooner or later God's gonna get you for that crap."

He pauses. Takes a big sip of water from a glass.

"Floods and hurricanes, they kept life interesting. Hell, I lost my virginity in a hurricane. The big moment—you know, the big O—it came just when the wind lifted the roof right off the house where we were doing the deed."

"Oh my God," Sue Ellen moans, "I can't believe he's saying that."

"My oh my," Melissa chuckles, and Mary says, "Well it's true, isn't it?"

"Not really."

"Y'all did it in a hurricane just like he said."

"I mean it's not right that ... oh shit. Never mind."

"What?" the girls both ask.

“Nothing.”

Shelly is glaring at them and Mary’s daughters are waiting in anticipation of something deliciously dirty. Mary is silently praying that they don’t ask her to explain what the big O is.

Melissa says, “She means it’s not true that that’s when he lost his virginity. That happened long before, didn’t it?”

The three of them mock fight on the couch and spill a lot of popcorn. Sue Ellen blushes and won’t say any more, and Shelly says, “That’s quite enough. You girls are acting like you’re ten years old.” They’re in their forties. Patricia and Rhonda are behaving more maturely, but are thrilled to see their mother and their aunts misbehave.

On the DVD, David has dropped the subject of losing his virginity in a hurricane but is still talking about stormy weather. He says, “Then there were the everyday summer squalls that were so regular you could set your watches by them. Every day in the summertime about three or four in the afternoon. First the humidity would start to come to a boiling point, temperatures and humidity both pushing a hundred. Then you’d see a cloud coming at you pouring rain over an area about the size of a football field. It’d be a ten-minute cloudburst followed by blinding sunlight. Everything washed clean.

“Almost half the year it was hot enough to go swimming. I’m talking right up till almost Halloween and starting again around Easter. We were practically amphibian. There was hardly a day I wasn’t on the water or in the water, swimming or fishing or skiing. My father taught me to swim when I was one year old. You know how? By throwing me in the water. Sink or swim, that was his idea. And I swam. You better believe it. Yeah, I know, there’s a million apocryphal stories about fathers throwing sons into the drink to teach them to swim. It’s a popular myth down in Dixieland. But mine really did. You would have thought it would scar me for life. I don’t know, maybe it did, maybe that was when I first started hating the old man.”

“He oughta be thanking me, the little ingrate,” Pop bellows. It’s his first comment of the evening. He’s been quietly sipping his highball and

smoking his hand rolled Prince Albert tobacco. The room reeks of cigarette smoke, but nobody seems to notice.

David continues, "But I don't remember it; it was just something Pop boasted about later. It never kept me from my love of swimming. I was on the high school swim team, and I used to have almost daily races with Randy Moss. That's Randy Moss Jr., the sheriff's son. Now he's the sheriff. That's the way it goes down there, every boy becomes his father. Except for me. There was no way I was going to take after my old man."

"See! See what I tell you. The little ingrate." Earl Ray hacks into his handkerchief, grabs the remote and stops the video. He hands his empty glass to Shelly and says, "Refill us."

She gets up and shuffles into the kitchen to get them another drink, her fluffy pink slippers going swish-swish-swish across the hardwood floor.

A minute later, freshened drink in hand, Pop restarts the DVD. The camera pans to the wall behind David where there is a relief map of the bayou country, and then back down to David, who says, "We'd race across Little Bayou. It was about a mile to the other shore. Or at least we always judged it to be about a mile; I don't guess either of us ever knew for sure. There was a floating platform in the bay out behind Randy's house with a homemade springboard. It was made of planks and floated on empty barrels. My sister Mary would count down. She'd say, 'Get ready, get set, go!' And we'd dive together like twin rockets slicing the water, sucking air right before we went under, holding our breath until we thought our lungs would burst, pulling water with scooped hands. That son of a bitch could hold his breath for what seemed forever, but Ha!—I could hold mine forever plus a minute."

David is pacing on stage as he recites this tale, swinging his arms in mimicry of swimming. He sticks his face right into the camera lens and puffs out his cheeks froglike and strokes imaginary water. Rhonda and Patricia swing their little arms with him. Mary says, "He's lying now. Randy always won those races."

"But David could hold his breath longer," Sue Ellen says.

David says, "I stayed right with him, glancing to the side under the murky water to see when he would give up and break the surface. I knew he'd give up. He always gave up. That's the way Randy was, all show and no go. He was stronger, but I could hold my breath longer. (Sue Ellen says, 'See!') We'd always make it way out from shore underwater. Fifty yards maybe. Seemed like half a fucking mile, finally spouting like whales when we breached the surface."

The older of Mary's girls says, "He said fucking," and Mary says, "Remember? We talked about when it's appropriate to use adult language and when it's not." She had a pretty liberal policy about cursing. It's okay for grownups, and it's okay at home when there's just the family, but she taught her girls to respect the sensitivity of other people who may be offended by coarse language. It was a source of constant conflict between Mary and her husband who, she thought, was too uptight about it.

The monologue continues. "In the swimming pool I'd get them to time me. The longest I ever held my breath was seven minutes and thirteen seconds. I heard the world record is over fifteen minutes. Wow! I can't fucking believe it."

"He said it again," the girls say.

Buddy says, "Okay, that's enough. Somebody should have warned us this was a R-rated movie. I don't know if I want the girls watching this."

Shelly pauses the DVD. Mary says, "Oh, don't be such a prude."

"Well it's not right."

"Oh geeze, you're such a hypocrite."

The girls giggle. Shelly says, "Do you girls even know what that word means?"

"Yes ma'am," the older girl says. "It's a slang expression for sex."

"Does it embarrass you to hear your uncle talk like that?"

"No ma'am. Aunt Melissa uses that word all the time."

"And so does daddy," Rhonda puts in, "When he thinks we aren't listening. So I don't know what he's getting all in a huff about."

Buddy says, "All right. I guess I overreacted."

They revisit the discussion about when and where it may be appropriate to curse, and why. Mary tells the girls that *how* words are used is more important than what the words are. “I’m much more concerned with words that are hurtful. Like you should never call people stupid or fat or ugly.”

The girls seem to fully understand and take their mother’s intention very seriously. And they say their daddy is just being silly. He confesses that they’re probably right. Then he says, “Hey, come on, girls, let’s go get some ice cream while we got the movie paused.”

After everyone has gotten snacks and made bathroom runs they restart the film. David takes a sip of his water and starts talking about another incident they all remember. “On the cliffside behind our house there were wooden steps that were dug right into the earth and ran down to the dock. Off to the side was a hard packed dirt trail that we could slide down after a rain or roll down in tractor inner tubes. I kind of ran and hopped and slid down to the dock barefooted. All I had on was a pair of cutoff jeans. One of those like, you know, with the pockets hanging out below where they’re cut and your package showing if you don’t watch out. You should have seen me. Tanned a deep bronze, long buttery blond hair bleached from the sun (with a little help from a bottle of Peroxide, something all the kids did back then). I walked out to the end of the dock. The boards under my feet were like hot coals, but hey, I could take it. I was one tough kid. I stood on the end of the dock and unsnapped and unzipped and stepped right out of my shorts. And my Jockeys. I stood there naked as the day I was born posing like some Greek athlete in the original Olympics, imagining who might or might not pass by in a boat and catch sight of me. Daring ’em, saying here I am, world! I thought I was pretty freakin’ hot, if you must know. Plus, the possibility of being caught out there in my altogether was kind of thrilling. Randy’s house was across the bay. It was far enough across that if Randy or his folks happened to be standing on their dock, which they weren’t, they probably couldn’t even tell I was naked, but somebody might come by in a boat. Maybe some girl from school. Maybe Mary Ann Wilson. She had the hots for me anyway.

We'd already made out pretty good in the swimming pool and would have gone all the way if we'd had some place to be alone. Okay, maybe not. I couldn't tell for sure if she wanted what she acted like she wanted that day in the pool, but even if she had we couldn't have done anything because it was broad daylight and there was a whole bunch of us together in the pool. I was still a virgin. We were just horsing around. She reached underwater and cupped my cock with her hand. Jesus. Shocked the everloving shit out of me. I'd never had a girl touch me like that."

Sue Ellen says, "Son of a bitch. He never told me about that."

"He could be making it up," Melissa notes.

David continues: "Maybe she wasn't really coming on to me after all. She had a whole troop of brothers, and maybe they played around like that. Maybe she was just playing gotcha. We were sitting together in the shallow end of the pool. She grabbed me first, so then I slipped a finger under the edge of her bikini. She let me rub her for about a minute, and she still had a hold of me. She wasn't just playing gotcha. I could see it in her eyes. Her face was all flushed, and the way she squirmed and rubbed on me... ooh whee. Damn. I was so flustered I didn't know whether to shit or go blind. But then she squirmed out of my grasp and kicked off with a laugh and started swimming to the deep end.

"For the rest of the afternoon we played around with the other kids. You know, the usual stuff. The girls would sit on the guys' shoulders and wrestle with each other, or the boys would make slings out of cupped-together hands and the girls would stand in our hands and we'd toss them in the air. All the boys and girls were flirting with each other, and the boys were copping feels whenever they could. One of the boys even tried to cop a feel from me, but I won't say who that was. And I never got another chance with Mary Ann. For the rest of the afternoon she darted away whenever I got close to her. We didn't even kiss or anything, and it never happened again. I never dated her. I should have asked her to go out with me that very night while she was still hot to trot, but I was so flustered I couldn't think what to do. I didn't exactly see myself as God's gift to women back then. Sure, I knew I was kind of good looking. After all, it

wasn't like we didn't have mirrors in the house. And I had a muscular body. I worked out a lot. But I wasn't real sure of myself in those days.

"Bullshit," Melissa laughs. "He thought he was the cock of the walk. 'Sides, didn't he just brag about how good looking he was?"

"So while I was standing there buckass naked on the dock I had this brief little fantasy about Mary Ann coming by in a boat and seeing me, and I don't know how I imagined we'd get from her passing by in a boat to us wallowing naked in a bed of sea grass, but that's what I pictured. Of course her coming by in a boat wasn't likely to happen. And if she did, it would probably be in a boat with her parents, and I sure as hell wouldn't want them to see me naked. But then that possibility was kind of a thrill too, you know what I mean? In a weird sort of way.

"But the one girl that might actually see me was Sue Ellen Jamison, because she was my sister Mary's best friend, and she might well drop by the house. She did, quite often. And Sue Ellen was a lot sexier than Mary Ann to boot."

"Ah ha! Now it's getting interesting," Sue Ellen says.

The monologue continues. "She might not have been as pretty as Mary Ann Wilson. She had straw colored hair and kind of splotchy skin and a slight crook in her nose. But she had a better body. Bigger boobs, anyway. All the boys called her Knockers.

"I imagined Sue Ellen seeing me in all my bronzed naked glory. I imagined her coming down to the dock, rubbing her hands up my side. Next thing you know we're wallowing in the sea grass. My dick was overpowering my brain. I was on the verge of drifting off into a neverending fantasy fuck. So I told myself to cut it out and dive in the fucking bayou. I inhaled deeply and dove out into the bay. I sliced the water like a knife cutting into a watermelon. I propelled myself underwater like a submarine, picturing in my mind Johnny Weissmuller in an old Tarzan film. Finally breaking the surface a good twenty yards out like a missile fired from a submarine. Wait a second, let me see if I can think of ten more similes. (The audience laughs, so do Mary and Sue Ellen.) I took half a dozen hard strokes then turned on my back and

floated lazily, looking back toward home. The sun was scorching hot, but there was a nice breeze and off to the southwest I saw black rain clouds spilling a cascade of silvery rain. It was the usual afternoon squall. It would sweep across the water and onto shore and pass over our house like a curtain in the wind, and then travel north to play itself out over the pine forests.

“I turned back over and started toward the opposite shore with a smooth crawl stroke, turning my head side to side with a gulp of air every other stroke. As I reached the lily pads and grasses over near Randy’s dock I slowed down and dog paddled. Toes touched the ooze of the bottom. I slipped underwater and imagined myself as a fish gliding between the blades of grass. I felt along the silty bottom. I opened my eyes but could see only a few inches ahead. The water stung my eyes. I eased my butt into the bottom. It felt gritty on my skin. Grasses grazing my side felt like cold leather. Here the water was just deep enough for me to sit on the bottom with my shoulders and head sticking out. Minnows nibbled at my legs and toes. I tried to scoop them up in my hand but they darted away too quickly. I could see that the rain squall in the distance was getting closer, and it looked like it had grown larger. It was starting to look more ominous than the usual squall. It was now a solid wall of water, and the sky was darkening all around as if someone were gradually dimming the lights. I figured I’d barely have time to swim back before I got caught in the storm. Not that it mattered so much if I got rained on. After all, I was already wet. But if the wind and waves picked up it would be harder to swim. But the main thing was the challenge to beat the storm. Challenge was what life was all about—how far could I dive? Swim underwater? How long could I hold my breath? Could I go skinny dipping in broad daylight without getting caught? And could I swim faster than a storm that was hurling my way like a cliff of water?