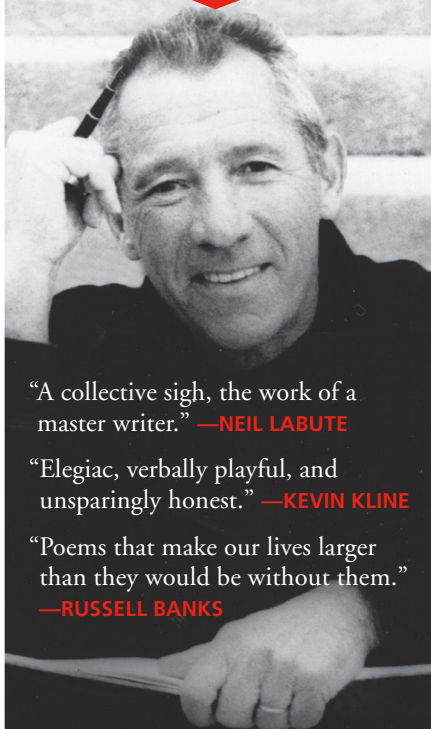


Russell Banks  
sits down with  
Israel Horovitz  
to chat about  
his new book  
*Heaven  
and  
Other Poems*



“A collective sigh, the work of a master writer.” —NEIL LABUTE

“Elegiac, verbally playful, and unsparingly honest.” —KEVIN KLINE

“Poems that make our lives larger than they would be without them.”  
—RUSSELL BANKS

Playwright-screenwriter-director Israel Horovitz’s seventy stage plays have been translated and performed in as many as thirty languages worldwide. Best-known plays include *Line* (now in its fortieth year, off-Broadway), *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, *Park Your Car in Harvard Yard*, and *My Old Lady*. Best-known films include *Author! Author!*, *Sunshine* (for which he won the European Academy Award–Best Screenplay), *James Dean* (which introduced James Franco), *3 Weeks After Paradise* (which he wrote, directed, and starred in), and *My Old Lady*, which he recently adapted for the screen and directed (at age seventy-four) starring Kevin Kline, Maggie Smith, and Kristin Scott Thomas.

Horovitz has written poetry throughout his lifetime. *Heaven and Other Poems* is the first collection of his poetry he has authorized for publication.

PHOTO: GAËLIA BLANDY, PARIS

**RB: Do you think poetry is necessary at this time in history? Why?**

**IH:** There’s poetry and there’s poetry. Serious poetry is written from the poet’s heart . . . especially now, when poets don’t give money-earning a moment’s thought because earning money from poetry is virtually impossible. I have faith that what’s written from the human heart finds a home in human hearts. So, yuh, necessary.

**RB: In your mind, what is a poem? As opposed to a play or film or work of prose fiction.**

**IH:** The Oxford dictionary tells us a poem is a “. . . literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm.” A poem, for me, is personal and concise. It’s a window into the poet’s heart. For me a great play or film or novel is personal but not concise. If it’s great work, it’s also a window into the writer’s heart. But the writer is hiding behind characters of his or her creation. A poet is, by contrast, next to naked . . . something akin to standing on a street corner in a really skimpy bathing suit.

**RB: You have a story about Samuel Beckett in your new book, *Heaven and Other Poems*, as well as poem translated by Beckett. What are some of the things you admired most about Beckett?**

**IH:** Clearly, what I admired most about Samuel Beckett was his integrity as a writer. He never, ever wavered from serious intent. He knew precisely why he was put on earth and he wasted not a minute. He had a poet’s love of language, but never let style or wordplay take command, steer the ship. His novels can be re-read a dozen times and never fail to surprise. His poetry is little-known, but beautiful. I think *Cascando* is a masterpiece.

**RB: You just directed a movie, *My Old Lady*, based on one of your plays. Has writing and directing for film and/or theater had any effect on your poetry writing?**

**IH:** Throughout my lifetime, I’ve been unable to work on more than one play at a time. . . . Writing a stage play or screenplay has always consumed me, taken over my life. I can’t stop . . . even after I’ve stopped. The people of my plays and films become insanely real for me. I worry about them long after I’ve written “FADE TO BLACK” or “CURTAIN” . . . And directing a play or movie leaves little time for eating or sleeping, let alone writing something else. But, writing poetry is the single exception to this self-inflicted rule. I have always written poems in addition to whatever else I’ve been writing. Writing a poem is a kind of holiday in sunshine . . . no matter how grim and adverse the verse. Writing poetry relaxes me. It’s literary Valium. I can work a week on a four-line poem, and often have.

**RB: Many of your poems are quite personal and deal with overcoming grief. What is it about the poetic form that makes it a vehicle more suitable for such sentiments than theater or film?**

**IH:** I am painfully aware of audience when I write plays and films. I’m not talking about what I think people want . . . I mean what I think people *need*. I’m always asking myself, “Why do people need this play? I’m taking up people’s time, spending their babysitter money. I’d better have something to say about life that’s meaningful.” I constantly ask myself, “What is it I’m trying to teach the audience about life?” I often think what interests the public isn’t in the best public interest. I often create characters in my plays that an audience would collectively cross the street to avoid in life. I love watching an audience find affection for characters they would avoid in life. When I write poetry, I never have any of these thoughts. I never imagine anybody actually sitting and reading the stuff. My poems are mostly me trying to figure out why I feel what I feel, why I do what I do. I never once thought I was writing poetry for publication. Publishing the poems in *Heaven and Other Poems* wasn’t my idea at all. I can’t even find half the poems I’ve written. They’re mostly buried somewhere in stacks of notebooks. . . . I write poetry for myself, really. . . . It turns out that I’m not at all special . . . so my innermost thoughts are fairly similar to the innermost thoughts of people who read and respond to my poems. That pleases me. But it’s not at all why I write poetry.

**RB: You note that you’ve written poetry all your life. How is your more recent poetry, written in your sixties and seventies, different from the poems you wrote in your early and middle years? How is it the same?**

**IH:** I suppose the love poems of our youth become the dirty old man love poems of our anecdote. I could glibly say that my old-guy poems (versus my studly young-guy poems) are death-obsessed, but, frankly, I’ve been death-obsessed since I was a child. I vividly remember my sixth birthday. We had two-session days in grade school with lunch breaks at home. On that particular birthday, a bunch of kids came home with me for a party. I blew out the candles on the cake and while the kids were singing the expected “Happy birthday to you . . .” I was thinking “I’m not five anymore. I don’t like the way this is going.” I can’t honestly say my old-guy poems are slimmer or more precise than my young-guy poems. I guess they’re more about old-guy concerns than they used to be. I’m not really sure I mean that. . . . I just wanna answer your questions, Russ, ‘cause I think yo’re a wick’id excellent writer. ❀

