



A new life rises years after fall

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Seldom does an inspirational story come out of a genius who suffers severe brain damage from a nasty fall.

A striking exception has to be the life, death and resurrection of Oakley Hall III as stunningly portrayed in a feature-length documentary from Californian Bill Rose, "The Loss of Nameless Things," playing through Friday at the Spectrum in Albany.

Beyond the significant intrinsic value of this film, we have a special reason to care for the main character. Nearly 30 years ago, Californians Oakley Hall III and Bruce Bouchard were co-founders of the Lexington Conservatory Theater in an unlikely, ramshackle Victorian-era resort in Greene County.

A few years after Oakley Hall III had his great fall, the equity company left bitter memories of Lexington behind and trundled its way to Albany to become the first incarnation of the Capital Repertory Theater. It was a dark night in July 1978. Oakley, 28, the son of celebrated novelist Oakley Hall II ("Downhill Racer"), was by his own admission under the influence of all sorts of stuff and unusually strung out from arguing with his wife, Mary, when he dove, fell or was pushed off the Lexington Bridge to land face-first on the rocks. Oakley Hall III died that night.

To be sure, the physician at the Stamford Hospital gave his heart a shot of epinephrine to get it beating again, and so saved the body. But the mind, the personality, died on those rocks.

That fall was the fulcrum of Oakley's life, all things being measured before and after it. Before, he was a dark, brooding and charismatic character with a supposedly stratospheric IQ. At least his friends and fellow actors saw him that way. He was their revered artistic director and creative well-spring. Oakley studied writing with John Cheever. Theatrical guru Joe Papp optioned one of his plays.

He was, at the moment of his fall, a heroic character of breathtaking promise and potential seemingly about to bloom.

After his severe head injury it was all gone. Eventually his wife and two small children left him as well. He wandered about Lexington, and later around the country, bewildered, speaking gibberish, a drunk, a burden to old friends. For years, he couldn't hold a job and lived at the fringes. But this is an inspirational story of resurrection, not a downer at all. While several of the actors, including Bouchard, telling the story in the documentary inevitably invite us to contemplate the loss of "what might have been," I am drawn to what was, and is.

I do remember Oakley Hall III in person, live, in the late '70s, both before and after the fall. I was the arts editor of this newspaper at the time and visited Lexington over a couple of summers. My overwhelming memory of the pre-fall Oakley is of a character who was bright as hell but living in damnation at the same time. He seemed driven to succeed and wildly unstable.

If ever there was an individual on a collision course with self-destruction, it was Oakley Hall III. Maybe he was destined for great things, but he was far more likely to blow himself up all over the universe in an artistic act of terrorism.

The resurrection that followed, though, owes much to the love of two women. Unpretty, painful, unconditional love that eventually gave Oakley Hall III the chance for a new life and a new identity. At age 52, he has acceptance and contentment in who he is, and is not. He has stopped drinking.

He lost genius. He gained pleasure in small things. I will let the gods debate that exchange.

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