

Style on the go»

BE SEEN, BE HEARD

Send your listings suggestions to styleonthego@washpost.com or call 202-334-5477. Please include a contact number.

By Lavanya Ramanathan



Large-scale photos focused on women's plight will hang today only at the Rayburn House Office Building.

BY RON HAVIV

Hardship in Congo: The Big Picture

The first time Leslie Thomas curated an exhibition, it got better exposure than one might expect. Way better. It was projected on the side of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The traveling show, "Darfur/Darfur," brought together photojournalists' images of the genocide in that region of Sudan at exactly the right moment, as international concern was reaching a peak.

Free. "Congo/Women" is open today, noon-7 p.m., with a reception from 5-7. Rayburn House Office Building Foyer, Independence Avenue and South Capitol Street SW. Visit www.congowomen.org.

Afterward, the goal of an informal group of organizers — just "me and the kitchen table and every friend I've ever had," says Thomas, a Chicago-based architect and onetime filmmaker — became the full-fledged Art Works Projects.

Today, the organization returns to Washington with a second exhibition, "Congo/Women," which expands the concept of using large, graphic images to address sexual and wartime violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The show features six color portraits measuring 7 by 10 feet, and 32 smaller black-and-white shots by Lynsey Addario, Marcus Bleasdale, Ron Haviv and James Nachtwey. It will hang at the Rayburn House Office Building today only before it moves on to a New York gallery and then a slew of college campuses.

The show — co-produced by Columbia College's institute for the study of women and gender — has a more specific target than its predecessor: It's meant for lawmakers.

"We're big on big," Thomas says. "Big and out there, and right in your face."

DON'T WAIT!



HIRSHHORN AFTER HOURS: COURTESY OF COLIN S. JOHNSON

Get tickets now for the area's best events.

Don't call it a comeback: **No Doubt** has announced its first tour after a five-year hiatus, and Gwen Stefani and Co. are coming to Nissan Pavilion on June 14. Tickets are \$24.50-\$80, and a recession-friendly \$10 for lawn tickets. A bonus: The band is offering a free digital download of their entire back catalogue with purchase of top-tier tickets (for details, visit www.nodoubt.com.) Tickets go on sale Saturday at 9 a.m. at www.livenation.com, the Nissan Pavilion box office (this Saturday only), or 877-598-8696.

On sale tomorrow at 10 a.m. are seats for **Robin Williams's** May 6 and May 7 "Weapons of Self Destruction" shows at DAR Constitution Hall. Tickets are \$65-\$95 and available through Ticketmaster at 202-397-7328 or www.ticketmaster.com. The last **Hirshhorn After Hours** was by far our favorite. The party returns March 27 to mark the Louise Bourgeois exhibition; the artists/video artists/DJs this time include Ricardo Rivera, the Klip Collective and Lumia Ensemble. Tickets are \$18 and will be available in advance only. On sale tomorrow. 202-633-4629

or visit www.hirshhorn.si.edu. Pioneering Philadelphia hip-hop dance company **Rennie Harris Puremovement** (about which Post critic Sarah Kaufman wrote: "You felt sucked into another universe") return March 13-14 to Atlas Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$25 through www.wpas.org or call 202-399-7993.

The District Onstage A First Peek at Rising Playwrights

Head to the Lincoln Theatre tonight to see five one-act plays: stagings of the winning scripts from the theater's first regional Emerging Voices Playwriting Competition. Professional actors take on the roles in Michael Merino's "Maybe"; Sharon E. Moore's "Line Two Is for You"; Randy Gross's "Bread"; Dean Poyner's "Moral Support"; and Amanda F. Healy's "Firefly." The best part: The evening is free. **Lincoln Theatre, 1215 U St. NW. Reservations are required; call 202-328-6000 or e-mail rsvp@thelincolntheatre.org. For information, visit www.lovetheatre.com.**

The District Nightlife Vixens Behaving Badly

The Vixen Variety Show at Palace of Wonders tonight will feature the baddest babes of the (local) stage, with sword-dancing, side shows and burlesque. They're usually not this naughty: This show, featuring Miss Joule, Belladonna and others (many of whom bared almost all for the Obama Wonderama bash) is themed "Evil Super Villain Show." \$10. 9 tonight. **Palace of Wonders, 1210 H St. NE. 202-398-7469 or www.palaceofwonders.com.**



BY STEVEN BIVIER

goingoutguide.com

FIND THINGS TO DO 24-7 ON THE WASHINGTON POST'S GOING OUT GUIDE

FOR MORE THINGS TO DO, SEE TODAY'S EXTRA

'Watchmen': Graphic but Not Novel

MOVIES, From Page C1

When it first appeared, "Watchmen" was hailed as a revolution in comic-book artistry. It was dark and ironic, a wry speculation on what the "real life" of superheroes might be like, set in a dystopian 1985, during the constitutionally extended presidency of Richard Nixon. It was two books in one, a look at the twisted, tortured, sexually kinky underworld of vigilantes who like to fight crime in costumes grafted onto an ordinary, race-against-the-doomsday-clock tale of pugilistic heroes and arch-villains. It deflated the very form it celebrated.

But it was ambitious in its storytelling, filled with flashbacks, subplots, and obscure strands of narrative slowly woven together over 12 serial installments. The graphic design, by Gibbons, was manically detailed, hyperkinetic and worked out with the precision of a movie storyboard. The novel was cultlike in its appeal, a little illicit, always alluding to its own profundity, hinting at secrets, drawing you deeper into its self-consciously metaphysical world.

This was catnip for the fanboys, who can be as snobbish about their comics as wine lovers or opera geeks are about their fetishes. And it attracted critics eager to find genius in the dark corners of American pop culture. Time magazine declared it one of the 100 Best English-language Novels since 1923, in the same league with Faulkner, Orwell and Hemingway. The academically inclined found it a brilliant deconstruction of the superhero myth, multivalent, polysemic, densely imbricated and all that jazz.

Which was pure hokey. "Watchmen" was fun, but also incredibly pretentious — a word that hardly applies anymore to high culture, but sure comes in handy when dealing with pop culture's more desperate efforts to be taken seriously. By treating the original text as a sacred document, the movie is laughably pretentious, too. Just as the film version of "Lord of the Rings" reminded everyone of something they had forgotten since reading the book in high school — Tolkien was a turgid writer — the "Watchmen" movie can't help but expose the glaring problem with the "Watchmen" graphic novel: The dialogue stinks.

Despite the intellectual name-dropping, the quotes from Nietzsche, Blake and Juvenal ("Who watches the watchmen?"), the level of Moore's writing rarely rises above B-movie fare. It is silly and dated, the faded gibberish of an old-fashioned *noir* stylist (the kind who now works for newspapers). And it is filled with clichés.

"We're all puppets," says the God-like Dr. Manhattan, the mysterious hero who looks like a blue version of Mr. Clean. "I'm just a puppet who can see the strings."

Ouch. Over the years, multiple efforts to film "Watchmen" have failed. Terry Gilliam, director of "Brazil," was engaged with the project for a while, but that fell through. Paul Greengrass ("The Bourne Ultimatum") worked on a version that updated the story from its Cold War setting to the War on Terror, but that didn't go far either. All of which led to the farcical notion that "Watchmen" was unfilmable.

Proust is unfilmable. "Das Kapital" is unfilmable. "Watchmen" is not unfilmable. It is already a parody of the cinematic, from its rapid cuts and interwoven short scenes to the camera angles suggested by Gibbons's often surreal perspective.

"Watchmen" wasn't unfilmable, it was unreadable. A script doctor might have helped de-clutter the often incoherent story line and tart up the leaden chatter.



WARNER BROS. PICTURES



BY DAVE GIBBONS

Director Zack Snyder reproduces the almost subliminal symbols and exact perspectives of the original artwork. Above, Jackie Earle Haley as Rorschach in the movie; left, a frame from the graphic novel by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons.

The actors do what they can. Crudup offers a certain daffy detachment as Dr. Manhattan, who was once a scientist but now, thanks to the sort of high-tech mishap that is distressingly commonplace in comic books, a shape-shifting, teleporting one-man bulwark against communism. Malin Akerman is generically sexy as Manhattan's primary blue-man groupie, and Patrick Wilson is generically nerdy as the sensitive guy next in line for her affections.

Hard-core fans will lament a few losses, including the "pirate" narrative, an unrelated comic within a comic that

gave the original novel a cool sense of layers and randomness. But given the movie's excessive length, nothing lost is really lamented. The most significant change between the movie and the novel is the density and immediacy of the violence. What was merely hinted at, or done off-stage in the book, is seen full on, with buckets of gore in the movie. Too bad.

The original "Watchmen" remains an interesting relic of the mood and politics of the mid-1980s. A lot of hagiography has obscured how controversial Ronald Reagan's eight years in office were, and

even though Richard Nixon is still president on the fictional timeline of "Watchmen," the novel is very much a reflection on Reagan's bellicose anti-Soviet rhetoric, and the sense (among his critics) that he had turned his back on the poor and unfortunate. The crack epidemic was in full swing, AIDS a looming disaster, and the urban revival of the 1990s was years off. New York could break your heart during the "Watchmen" years.

Some of that detail is dealt with in the opening scenes, a brilliant, fast-paced tour through Moore's alternate version of American history. This was the novel's great strength — an imagined world, rich in detail, familiar but alien at the same time. When the movie lingers there, it entertains.

But when it marches in lockstep with Moore's tedious plot and recapitulates the leaden back and forth of his cardboard characters, the only watch that matters in "Watchmen" is the one on your wrist. It's telling you life is too short for this movie.

Watchmen (162 minutes, at area theaters) is rated R for strong graphic violence, sexuality, nudity and language.

ON WASHINGTONPOST.COM Watch the trailer and find showtimes online at washingtonpost.com/movies.