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Book Review: Dugout

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Dugout. By Terry Allen. Essays by David Byrne, Dave Hickey, and Terrie Sultan. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. xii + 274 pp. Color illustrations, compact disc. \$29.95.

Like the work of art it documents, Terry Allen's book is a multifaceted, multimedia chronicle of growing up in postwar west Texas. Allen, a visual artist and musician from Lubbock, is known for sprawling narrative epics conveyed through drawings, sculptures, assemblages, tableaux, written texts, music, and performances. Leaping back and forth across the decades, *Dugout* is loosely based on his parents' stories of their hardscrabble lives in the early twentieth century and the widespread fear of Martians, Communists, polio, Thalidomide, and The Bomb during Allen's own adolescence. "The language of the 1950's West Texas living room," he writes, "is nerve wracking."

Dugout, the art work, consists of three parts, which were presented concurrently in Los Angeles in the spring of 2004. *Dugout (Part I)* includes six sculptural tableaux inspired by his father, a retired baseball player for the St. Louis Browns, and his mother, a former barrelhouse piano player. An expansive art and video installation centered on the wooden frame of a house

and a giant stuffed marionette identified as "Warboy" (Allen's alter ego), *Dugout II (Hold On to the House)* derives from the artist's childhood memories. Fusing narratives from the first two sections, *Dugout III: Warboy and the Backboard Blues* is a two-person stage play, featuring Jo Harvey Allen as "The Woman," accompanied by a three-man band, including Terry Allen, who also performs as "The Man." *Dugout*, the book, includes a CD of the performance recorded by National Public Radio, along with the script, Allen's notes, and extensive photographic documentation of *Dugout I, II*, and *III*.

As complex and layered as the art work, the book includes three sections corresponding to the work's three parts. Between sections 1 and 2 is Dave Hickey's hauntingly beautiful essay on High Plains "culture where nothing like culture has previously existed." In a reversal of the approaches one would have expected from an art critic and an artist-musician, David Byrne of the Talking Heads contributes an eloquent interpretation of the Allen family saga. The Allens' tall tales—including Terry's father's recollection of the removal of his tonsils with a hot poker in 1894, his mother's birth in a hillside dugout in Oklahoma and her alcohol-fueled adult promiscuity, and Allen's lurid descriptions of deformed Thalidomide children—are based on real life. Autobiographies, however, are based on memories, subject to embellishment and, as Allen points out, notoriously faulty. The story is better understood as a universal epic. According to Byrne, "Maybe all of us grow up in a land of perverted memory, edited history, skewed beliefs, and parents who are not exactly what they appear to be."

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