

# Halcyon Days

by Mark A. Sullivan

In politically dispirited times, it is inspiring to reflect on the Utopianists of New York and vicinity who embodied a particular and durable optimism. These fellow-travelers agreed to disagree — for example, Emma Goldman's Anarchism was sometimes at odds with Upton Sinclair's Socialism, and both had their differences with Henry George's Single Tax. Going along for the ride were the Vegetarians, Nudists, Atheists, and Free Love advocates who also populated the social movement. But the humanistic thrust that brought these dreamers together was a shared faith that men and women could solve the problems of the earth.

"Sketching Utopia" by Laurel Hessing is a musical drama of the lives of Greenwich Village radicals who, in the halcyon days before the First World War, envisioned and built "ideal communities" based on the exciting progressive social philosophies that flowered in artistic circles at the time. It was presented by Theater for the New City, January 25 to February 18, in conjunction with the New York Public Library's exhibition, "Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World." The music for the play is composed by Arthur Abrams, and the director is Crystal Field.

This play tells the true story of Ernest and Udina deGuilbert Eberlein, an artist and his actress wife who met in the Straight Edge community of Greenwich Village, and lived in Upton Sinclair's commune, Helicon Hall, overlooking the Hudson River from the Palisades in Englewood, New Jersey. After Helicon Hall was firebombed in 1911, Ernest and Udina and their children settled in Free Acres, in the New Jersey's Watchung Mountains, where the activist Bolton Hall had established



*The theatrical delights of "Sketching Utopia" complemented the message. All the elements of the production worked beautifully together — from original script and music, to the actors and the authentic costumes they wore designed by Terry Leong. The final scene: The Eberleins, Emma Goldman, and others arrive during a firefly-lit night at Free Acres to witness a performance of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer's Night's Dream", after which they all go up into the audience and exchange greetings — as if extending an invitation to play one's part in the drama of life. — M.A.S.*

# SKETCHING UTOPIA



a new community based on Single Tax principles.

The majority of the original leaseholders in Free Acres were struggling artists, writers and actors — and as in other such communities, women's rights and racial nondiscrimination were practiced there. Both Laurel Hessing (archivist of Free Acres) and her sister Crystal Field were raised in the pastoral setting of Free Acres, and knew well the children of the Eberleins, whose memories provide the narrative of the play.

“Sketching Utopia” dramatizes the lives of the Eberleins, Upton and Meta Sinclair, Emma Goldman, Bolton Hall, and Sinclair Lewis at the point when Helicon hall is razed (and Meta's marriage is undermined by Upton's free-love — as if to demonstrate the fragility of a community where women could pursue their careers while the children were raised communally). The fire was thought to be the work of one or another of Upton Sinclair's enemies — the monopolists in the meat packing or steel industries.

While the blaze destroyed Helicon Hall, along with many great books and numerous works of art, utopianism itself regenerates as a Phoenix. In the view of playwright Hessing, the vicious arson that killed Helicon Hall's carpenter, Lester Briggs, actually ushered in a series of rebirths, including the more enduring community of Free Acres — and even a more humane US government. The spirit of Helicon Hall and Free Acres even helped mold the kibbutzim of Israel, whose role as a model of the Utopian Dream was illustrated in an accompanying photo exhibition at Theater for the New City. (Adapted from the Press Release issued by Victoria Linchon, Theater for the New City.)

On February 1st, a gala reception and symposium followed the play. I was honored to introduce Mike Curtis (Philadelphia Henry George School Director) who spoke on Single Tax principles and on Arden, the “sister community” founded by Frank Stevens in Delaware (as noted in the play by Bolton Hall). Curtis was followed by Dr. Martin Bierbaum, an expert on Free Acres and Bolton Hall; and Dr. Leonard Arie Gold, a former Free Acres resident and Kibbutz member. The relevance of Henry George's ideas in general, and the life and work of Bolton Hall in particular, was represented at every performance by material from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, which also contributed a modest grant to Theater for the New City in support of its publicity costs on behalf of the play.

“Sketching Utopia” exposes its audience, by means of dialogue and plot, song and dance, to still-unresolved social issues, such as globalization and free trade with Latin America. It also provides a window into the Progressive Era before the world went to war and the Single Tax got lost in the bloody shuffle — the horrors of the meat packing industry, the Irish land question, the oppression of women, and the role of artists in “sketching utopia”. Although it is ten years into the Twentieth Century, it is really, like borrowed time, the eleventh decade of the Nineteenth — which will eventually go down with the Titanic, the World War, and the Russian Revolution.

Speaking personally, the play tapped into my own early idealism, born in the 1960s, and nurtured by (among others) Mildred Loomis and the School of Living, a close cousin to Free Acres. I left “Sketching Utopia” feeling that I had been reawakened — and wanting to keep watch throughout the night, until dawn, until the break of a new day. I have no doubt that many others in the play’s full-house audiences were touched in a similar way. One can only hope that in the future the play will be published and made available to a wider audience. Indeed, this true story can help to breathe new life into the aspirations of our youth, which now lay suffocating under the global blanket of a new “compassionate” (sic) social Darwinism which will tolerate no alternatives. “Sketching Utopia” calls us to listen, turn about, and help restore the earth as the birthright and promised land of all beings.

Happiness is to be found in the service of our fellow creatures, through which we come to be one with the mind of the Universe. It does not depend upon what success we may see in this service. The effort to remove the causes of the sufferings of others and especially to enable them to think rightly, so that they may themselves avoid evil, is in itself a joy.

— Bolton Hall, *Life and Love and Death* (1898)

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**Two-Rate Shift Approved in Fairfax, Virginia.** Bill HB2663, which would allow the city of Fairfax to use the two-rate property tax, has passed both houses of the State Legislature and sits, as of this writing, on the Governor’s desk awaiting a signature. Chalk up another local-reform victory for the hard-working folks at the Henry George Foundation of America. HGFA Director Josh Vincent writes, “It strikes me that this is a good ‘small toe’ type bill to get us in the door. We got it through the Assembly the first time out, even with real opposition from the Chamber of Commerce (modified by the support of LVT by the Realtors). Of course, it’s easier to cut off a small toe, but you see my point. In the coming year, we will have to do what we can to get Fairfax City to use this option; once used it’s going to be easier to gain support from other cities as well as the unusually sluggish Virginia League of Municipalities (other such state groups usually leap to support LVT).”