

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GIL ORLOVITZ

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Poet, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Gilbert “Gil” Orlovitz was born on June 7, 1918, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Morris and Rose Orlovitz. Morris, whose father was the chief rabbi of Lithuania, was born in 1893 and immigrated to the United States in 1892. Rose, born in 1887, immigrated in 1890. Gil was named for an older brother, 10 years his senior, who was killed as a child when, walking through a park, he was struck on the head by an errant fly ball. Another brother, Henry, was born in 1907.

According to military records, Orlovitz had two years of college education, at Temple University in Philadelphia, when he enlisted in the Army on October 31, 1941. His occupation at the time was recorded as author, editor, and reporter. He served four years in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, and it was during this time that his poetry was first published; two short poems appeared in the Summer 1944 issue of *Rocky Mountain Review* (Salt Lake City). Following the war, he attended Columbia University, where he studied dramatic composition, comparative religion, and philosophy. He also studied at the Dramatic Workshop in New York under the tutelage of German expatriate stage director Erwin Piscator.

Orlovitz’s first collection of poetry, *Concerning Man*, was published by The Banyon Press (New York) in 1947. Dedicated to his first wife Bettie Bennett (referred to as St. R in two of the poems), the book was well received by critics. In the July 12, 1947 edition of *The Saturday Review*, Alfred Kreymborg wrote that Orlovitz was “a poet with an amazing talent for grappling with human and superhuman problems on a wildly rhetorical basis” and with “an original gift for the elegiac mood [who] never softens his energetic drive with illusion or sentiment.” Orlovitz’s marriage to Bennett, later an accomplished theatrical photographer, ended in divorce shortly after the birth of their daughter.

In addition to writing prolifically during 1940s and 1950s (at least 15 copyrighted plays, 17 published short stories, and countless poems in small literary magazines), Orlovitz worked as a radio monitor, a typist for a sub-

subsidiary of Standard Oil, and in the import-export business. Three of his plays were produced off-Broadway: *A Case of a Neglected Calling Card* in 1952, *Noone* in 1953, and *Stephanie* in 1954. In 1955, he was signed to a long-term screenwriting contract with Universal Pictures and relocated to Hollywood, California, with his second wife, the actress-singer Maralyn “Lynn” Marquize, and her daughter, Audrey, from a previous marriage. The Internet Movie Database lists only one screenplay writing credit for Orlovitz, the 1956 film noir crime drama *Over-Exposed*, “a forgettable piece of 1950s sleaze” according to one recent reviewer. In 1957, he turned his talents to television, writing episodes for two ABC Western series, *The Adventures of Jim Bowie* and *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*.

In 1957, *The Miscellaneous Man*, a small Berkeley-based literary magazine published by William Margolis, devoted a double issue to Orlovitz: *The Statement of Erika Keith and Other Stories, Poems, and a Play*. The issue, along with Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems*, was purchased at City Lights Books on June 3, 1957 by two plainclothes San Francisco police officers, resulting in the arrests of store manager Shigeyoshi “Shig” Murao and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti on charges of disseminating obscene material. For the ensuing trial, William Hogan, literary editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote court statements defending both publications. He described Orlovitz’s *Erika Keith* as “the work of a sincere, growing, and dedicated literary talent, a talent provocative and stimulating enough to interest and excite admiration in serious critics and observers of literary craftsmanship of our time.”

By publishing Orlovitz’s poem “Index (3rd Series): 2,” which contained the lines “a butterfly dared me to fuck it” and “your cunt split like the red sea / the jews passed through,” Margolis must have anticipated some legal difficulties, as well as some subsequent publicity for his magazine. Unfortunately for both him and Orlovitz, the press at the time focused on Ginsberg’s *Howl* and little mention was made of *Erika Keith*. Orlovitz went so far as to write Ferlinghetti, demanding that he address the exclusion of his work “in the press to which you are so well connected” and, further, accused him of being part of a “cheap literary cabal — with apparently no more integrity than its East Coast counterpart — which attempts to bask one author at the shadow of another.” On October 3, 1957, Judge Clayton W. Horn ruled that *Howl* was not obscene and consequently all charges related to *The Miscellaneous Man* were dropped.

Orlovitz’s poetry was again the subject of controversy later that year. The editors of Beloit College’s *Beloit Poetry Journal*, on the suggestion of

co-founder Chad Walsh, decided to fill out their Winter 1957–1958 issue with poems from “underground” West Coast poets, including the not-yet-famous Charles Bukowski. From several available Orlovitz pieces, the editors selected for inclusion the one they felt would be the most contentious, a poem titled simply “Not.” Members of the college’s board of trustees took particular offense to the poem’s line “not jesus jerking off, not mohammed with his coeds” and decided to withhold future financial support for the publication.

A short autobiographical piece appeared in the Winter 1958–1959 issue of *The Literary Review* (Fairleigh Dickinson University). Orlovitz wrote that he was presently at work on four large poetry projects — *The Diary of Matthew Parson*, *M’sieu Mishiga*, *The Letters of Great Ape*, and *Art of the Sonnet* — as well as a major work of fiction, *Ice Never F*, the first installment in a series of semiautobiographical experimental novels “provisionally entitled *Now*.” However, it was its successor, *Milkbottle H*, which was published first. Shopped around for years among U.S. publishers, it was finally accepted in 1967 by Calder & Boyars in London, which had already published experimental works by such authors as Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. A U.S. edition was released the following year by Dellacorte Press. The novel was very well received in the U.K.; *The Scotsman* called it “a major event in the history of the American imagination,” and the *Cork Examiner* hailed it as “one of the great, if not the greatest, literary achievements of our time.”

U.S. reviewers were far less enthusiastic. Thomas Lask of *The New York Times* dismissed it as a “rambling montage of words” and concluded his review with, “There have been few books in recent years that have demanded so much of the reader and yielded so little in return.” Only Kevin Sullivan of the *Chicago Tribune’s Book World* seemed to understand what Orlovitz was doing with his fiction. He wrote that there was “no container for the verbal energies at work here, no plot, no beginning and no end to the rush and crush of language,” and that Orlovitz was creating “a new genre that no longer experiments with form but discards all form and concentrates on the presentation of immediately felt experience or, more accurately, allows that experience to present itself.”

Ice Never F was published in 1970, again by Calder & Boyars. It was virtually ignored. Orlovitz gave the manuscript for a third novel in the series to his friend, the writer Anaïs Nin, who agreed to help find a publisher for it. This was likely the work titled *Will Frank Marry Mary?*, listed as forthcoming on the back cover of Orlovitz’s *Art of the Sonnet*, published

by Hillsboro Publications in 1961. However, Hillsboro ceased operations the following year and the novel was never released. (One Internet source states that publisher Michael Lebeck had abandoned his press and joined a mystical religious sect.) The current whereabouts of the manuscript are unknown, although letters suggest that it may have been lost in the mail between Orlovitz and James Boyer May, publisher of the literary magazine *Trace*.

Adding further to Orlovitz's frustrations, NET (National Educational Television, the precursor to PBS), had arranged to film and televise his thirty-nine-scene masterwork play, *Gray*, based on events in the life of Abraham Lincoln, but unexpectedly canceled the project after five years of negotiations. This setback, along with the lukewarm reception to his novels and his ongoing difficulty in securing a major publisher for his poetry, was likely a contributing factor to the depression and subsequent alcoholism that haunted Orlovitz during the later years of his life.

Orlovitz struggled financially during the 1960s and early 1970s and had to resort to hack writing and editing jobs at various New York paperback firms to support his family, which then included two young sons, Guy-Max and Ethan, in addition to his adopted daughter Audrey from Maralyn's first marriage. His friends Anaïs Nin and the poet Guy Daniels helped secure for him a copy-editing job at Avon Books. Thomas Payne, editor-in-chief at Avon, referred him to Universal Publishing, where he worked as an editor of soft-core lesbian pornography novels, and wrote more of the same under the pseudonym of Stacey Clubb. One of his last known jobs was a position with Marvel Comics, then a subsidiary of Magazine Management, which specialized in adventure, celebrity/film, and risqué men's magazines. Often spending twelve hours a day at what he considered degrading work, he continued to pursue his own distinctive craft, usually between the hours of 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. By 1973, his alcoholism had taken its toll; mentally exhausted and no longer able to write, he was unemployed, in very poor health, and living on welfare in a single room in Harlem, a few blocks away from his then-estranged wife and family.

On July 9, 1973, Orlovitz collapsed on the street and was taken to nearby Knickerbocker Hospital. He was in a coma with a 108-degree fever and died the next day. The cause of death was recorded as bronchial pneumonia. Police and hospital officials were initially unable to locate any relatives so he was buried in a pauper's grave at New York's City's public cemetery on Hart Island in the Bronx. His wife didn't learn of his death until July 21 when she contacted the Bureau of Missing Persons to report his disappear-

ance; despite being separated, Maralyn and Gil had kept in weekly contact with each other. At the urging of Sidney Bernard, associate publisher of the literary magazine *The Smith*, a lengthy obituary finally appeared in *The New York Times* on September 8, nearly two months after Orlovitz's death.

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