

THE SKINNY ON SKIN Top beauty bloggers reveal the worst things you can do to your face, **E8**

LIFE & ENTERTAINMENT

ON ONO

Author's urban insecurities exposed in dystopian debut

GREG QUILL
BOOKS COLUMNIST

For readers mining for metaphorical gold in Toronto writer Pasha Malla's dark and complex first novel, *People Park*, a futuristic fantasy set in a dystopian island city-state suddenly imperiled by a malicious trickster, here's a hint:

Don't bother.

"I didn't intend any direct allegorical references at all," said the 34-year-old Newfoundland-born author earlier this week over coffee in the shady backyard of the Riverdale apartment that he shares with his girlfriend, artist Stefanie Bruce.

"I was more interested in creating a story that offers multiple possibilities, a

variety of readings. If I'd decided on the allegorical method, it would mean there's a right way and a wrong way to read the book.

"And I didn't want to limit the experience that way."

Besides, he added, he doesn't feel qualified to reduce a complex world view to metaphor.

"It's a noble idea, but as someone in his early 30s I wonder how much truth I can reveal to readers who've lived twice as long. It was enough to make what happens (in the story) an extension of our current insecurities, without being too specific."

MALLA continued on E5



ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR
People Park author Pasha Malla at his Riverdale apartment.

Alan Thicke onstage in GTA

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

An up-and-coming new musical just got itself a big established star.

Alan Thicke, the Emmy-nominated Canadian actor, has joined the cast of *Queen for a Day: the Musical*, which will premiere on Sept. 26 at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts, the Star has learned.

The musical is based on the first reality radio and TV show, which ruled the airways for more than 20 years, giving ordinary women the chance to become "queen for a day." Thicke will play Jack Bailey, the host of the show, who was a massively popular media figure in his day.

"I am thrilled to be joining such an amazing all-Canadian cast and creative team for the world premiere of *Queen for a Day*," said Thicke.

THICKE continued on E5

ON ONO

» ENTERTAINMENT

Novel explores public space

MALLA from E1

Malla is clearly troubled by reports that readers familiar with the crisp and uncluttered offerings in his 2008 Trillium Award-winning, Giller-longlisted collection of short stories, *The Withdrawal Method*, have trouble finding their way through the first hundred pages of *People Park*. Those pages describe a strange, Orwellian otherworld — inhabited by no fewer than 36 characters whose lives intersect during the disastrous long weekend spanned in the novel. Still, Malla is hopeful that perseverance will be rewarded.

“Although I consider it a kind of comedy, I took this book very seriously when I was writing it,” said Malla, who was included in the Star’s showcase of people to watch in 2012. “It’s a catalogue of things that trouble me or frighten me, particularly the erosion of space, both public and private.

“It concerns me that social networks like Facebook, which occupy what’s supposed to be public space, the Internet, are being used to create an illusion of supposedly private revelations. We create caricatures of our true identities online. We seem able to suspend disbelief in order to construct false archetypes that have their own kind of truth.

“In so-called secular urban spaces, what evidence is there of what we believe, who we are, our defining mythologies and ideologies? And what do we put our faith in?”

One of three children born to a Kashmiri father and a British mother — a psychologist and a social worker, respectively — Malla was raised a voracious and inquisitive reader who somehow knew at age 5 that he’d become a writer of some kind.

“The other options at that age were astronaut and biker gang member, neither of which ever



ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

People Park author Pasha Malla in his Toronto backyard.

seemed attainable,” he said.

When he was 3 the family moved to Chatham, then London, Ont., and put down roots. Malla studied for his master’s degree at Montreal’s Concordia University, and spent his third year as a “student abroad” in Adelaide, South Australia, where at age 21, he hiked alone for six weeks up Australia’s remote west coast on the 1,000-km Bibbulmun Track.

“Sounds kinda cheesy, but I found myself during that time in Australia,” Malla said.

“I’d been studying to be a filmmaker,

and around that time I started thinking about getting back to writing fiction.”

Malla, who works as a freelance writer for *The Walrus*, *McSweeney’s* and other magazines and teaches creative writing at the U of T, has begun work on a new novel set in Kashmir. But lately he has been thinking about a movie script as well — “a horror movie... I love horror movies.”

Built on the remnants of a much earlier novel about a terrorist attack in Montreal — abandoned “because I discovered the things I had to say

about separatism weren’t particularly insightful,” Malla said — *People Park* is a highly stylized account of events leading up to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of a huge public space in an unnamed city ruled by a sinister brotherhood of male autocrats apparently determined to widen the gap between the wealthy elite and an increasingly disenfranchised working class fed mindless “real-life” non-narratives instead of news on TV, and occasionally amused by displays of magic by the charismatic Raven, a mysterious illusionist with a volatile repertoire.

There’s lots of raunchy humour and rich social satire in the novel, but not much in the way of civil discourse in Malla’s imagined city state, and no recourse to spiritual nourishment or relief in religious exercises. These characters seem utterly alone in a godless universe, and forsaken and hopeless in their own prisonlike island home.

“I was raised an atheist, probably because my father had seen too much misery in Pakistan in the name of religion before he was forced to leave,” Malla said. “He didn’t go back for 27 years, and even now, it’s a dangerous proposition because of his family’s Hindu past.

“You don’t need an ideology to be a good human, so in my book all the citizens have stopped believing in God, although in my own life I have picked up some rituals that have religious origins and confuse my friends,” he added.

“When Stef and I have people over for dinner, I ask them to say grace... not as a prayer, but as an expression of gratitude for what we have. We don’t have much. We don’t need much. The money we get, we spend on books and rent and food. And that’s a good life. I don’t write to be rich or famous. My only thought is to get each piece of work finished, get it done and move on.”

Growing Pains star joins musical

THICKE from E1

“The original series was a smash success during its run and I am looking forward to creating the character of Jack Bailey, a man who enriched the lives of so many women throughout the years.”

Thicke was born in Kirkland Lake, Ont., in 1947. After an early career in Canadian television that included hosting the 1970s game show *First Impressions* and producing *The René Simard Show*, he headed to Los Angeles to work on the cult hit *Fernwood 2 Night*.

Thicke’s biggest impression was made playing Dr. Jason Seaver, the psychiatrist patriarch on *Growing Pains*, the popular series that lasted from 1985 to 1992. He’s also known as the composer of the theme songs for other popular shows like *The Facts of Life* and *Diff’rent Strokes*.

Thicke’s stage appearances include a turn on Broadway as shyster lawyer Billy Flynn in *Chicago* and a critically applauded performance as the villainous boss in the Hollywood Bowl staging of *Promises, Promises*. Despite the fact that it’s only playing 12 performances initially in a theatre somewhat off the Toronto radar, *Queen for a Day* isn’t a tiny production by any means.

The show (with a score by Linda Barnett and a book by Chris Earle, Shari Hollett and the late Paul O’Sullivan) has an all-Canadian cast of 22, with such notable musical theatre stars as Blythe Wilson, Lisa Horner and Denise Fergusson taking leading roles. Well-known director Timothy French is helming the proceedings.

Thicke will be at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts, 10268 Yonge St., between Sept. 26 and Oct. 7. Go to queenforadaythemusical.com for more info.