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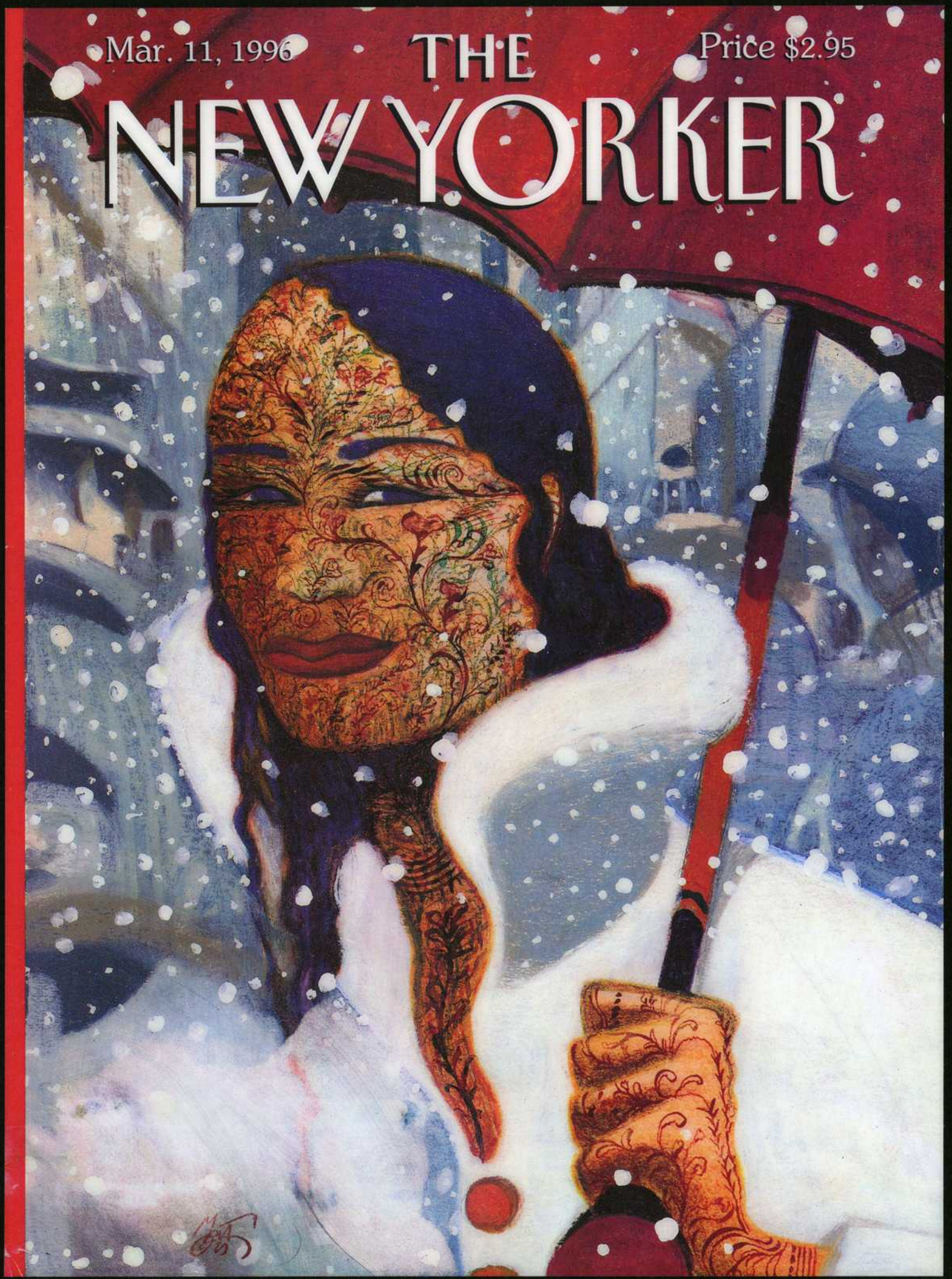

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

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JURY TAMPERING

THERE'S a new hot-button issue in the American legal community these days: computerized juries. An artificial-intelligence expert named Dr. Joseph Bonuso recently announced that he and his colleagues at New York University Law School had successfully completed work on the Solomon Project—a computer program that, using "voice-stress analysis" of courtroom testimony and a process called "fuzzy logic," arrives at trial verdicts. When Dr. Bonuso made public the results of the program's verdicts in some notorious cases—it acquitted Mike Tyson and convicted Claus von Bülow, the Menendez brothers, William Kennedy Smith, and O. J. Simpson—he was roundly denounced by attorneys and judges, embraced by talk-radio hosts, and enthusiastically covered by mainstream media outlets like the San Francisco *Chronicle*, the *American Lawyer*, and CNN. But, before you tear up your most recent call to jury duty, take heed: the Solomon Project is a hoax—another score for the performance artist and media prankster Joey Skaggs.

Skaggs, whose past scams include Portofess (a portable confession booth) and the Fat Squad (a band of for-hire commandos who forcibly restrained dieters from overeating), says that the Solomon Project was meant as a serious commentary on our judicial system and, specifically, on the Simpson trial. "Most of America wanted to hear definitively that O. J. Simpson was guilty," he said, sipping a glass of red wine in his Sullivan Street apartment the other day. "They wanted a computer to say, 'He did it.' "

At first, Skaggs, no expert in law or computers, didn't answer the phone line that he had dedicated to the Solomon Project, though he methodically recorded all messages left at the number. His reticence backfired when callers, desperate to find Dr. Bonuso, besieged the N.Y.U. press office with inquiries. Initially, N.Y.U. offered to help publicize the Solomon Project, but after the school discovered that no Joseph Bonuso taught there, its attorneys threatened legal action.

Skaggs, meanwhile, was emboldened by the number of responses and, as Dr. Bonuso, began to take phone calls and grant interviews. He was even a guest on a couple of live radio call-in shows. No one seemed to mind as Dr. Bonuso stumbled through technical explanations of his Solomon Project. Eventually, producers from CNN tracked him down.

Skaggs was delirious: television is a hoaxter's promised land. He borrowed an office full of computers, got twenty-five actors to staff them or play reporters, and enlisted programmers to design something—anything—to put on the computer screens. (One result: an image of O. J. Simpson's head with the word "GUILTY" flashing above it.) When CNN arrived, the presence of print "journalists" and camera crews gave the suggestion of a real media event. (One of the cameras belonged to Frederick Marx, the director of "Hoop Dreams," who was filming the hoax for a documentary on Skaggs.) For an hour and a half, actors typed away with the sour expressions of alienated data-entry clerks, while Skaggs, sitting before the camera with the straight face of a career prankster, predicted doom for human juries. After the CNN crew left, Skaggs looked around the room at his actors, pumped his fist, and howled, "Yes!" Two days later, after taping angry responses from some lawyers, CNN ran the segment on "PrimeNews." The story was aired repeatedly on "Headline News," and a multimedia version is still posted at CNN's World Wide Web site.

Joey Skaggs

It turns out that the reading public was more skeptical than the media. A hundred or so letters were sent to the Solomon Project; one, from a K. Michael Young, of Nome, Alaska, ended, "Really, I would like to hear from you that this is a strange joke, meant to promote and provoke discussion about the very serious matter of justice." A beaming Skaggs crooned, "I can't wait to call this guy up and say, 'Right on!' "