

His forum is making philosophy almost fun

by Robert Strauss

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Mike Raymond was in the travel section, looking for a guide for his upcoming European trip, when he heard the announcement over the loudspeaker: "Philosophy discussion."

"How strange," he thought, as he ambled up to the third floor of the Barnes & Noble bookstore on Rittenhouse Square to join in.

"I haven't even thought about philosophy since a college freshman survey course. But you know what? It wasn't painful to listen to at all."

That's just the reaction Richard Shusterman hopes for with his "Dialogue on the Square" series, which he conducts once a month during the academic year. Back from its summertime hiatus, the series picks up again Tuesday, with a discussion about Jacques Derrida and deconstruction led by Professor John Caputo of Villanova, an expert on post-modernism.

On Oct. 10, the controversial and amusing Christopher Hitchens, contributor to the Nation and Vanity Fair, drops by to talk about truth, politics and journalism on the eve of election 2000.

Previous guest speakers have included a woman who talked about why taste has attained such a low standing among the five senses, and a former rock critic for Newsweek, who talked about about the philosophical origins of rock-and-roll.

Coming topics include Wittgenstein, Plato, bioethics, aesthetics, and Heidegger, with speakers from Swarthmore, Princeton, Temple and Villanova.

The variety of the list is a clue to Shusterman's own philosophical leanings. The chairman of the philosophy department at Temple University is a pragmatist, which means he wants to apply the supposedly arcane discipline of philosophy to general life.

"The idea is to bring philosophy to a public space," said Shusterman, sitting on a bench in Rittenhouse Square.

"After all, when we think of philosophy, we think of Socrates and the agora. Sure, Barnes & Noble is a commercial venture, but what was the agora if not a public market space?"

Shusterman's philosophical pragmatism has taken him in myriad directions. A music lover, he has written extensively about the origins and meanings of hip-hop and rap. A fanatic about running - he and his wife chose to live in the Art Museum area primarily to accommodate their lengthy runs along the Schuylkill - he has taught courses on the mind and body that include

philosophical musings on diet, sports and sex.

Lest you think Shusterman doesn't come by his philosophical station with proper egghead qualifications, however, consider that he has graduate degrees from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and St. John's College at Oxford University and teaches, in addition to Temple, at the College International de Philosophie in Paris.

Along with his writings on hip-hop, he has written extensively on Wittgenstein, T.S. Eliot and John Dewey.

He wrapped up last season's dialogues in April with a talk by New York University Professor Andrew Light about environmental ethics. With about two dozen people crammed into the third-floor rear space between the film and music books, Light chatted about modern and ancient philosophers whose thoughts on the environment were both deep and practical.

"The most famous of all pre-Socratic philosophers was Thales, who is known for his statement, 'All is water,' " said Light. "Of course, he also predicted a drought in Greece and made a killing in the olive oil market. So philosophers have long been involved in daily life."

Though an academic, Light works with such groups as the Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service to restore and preserve forests and open space in and around cities.

"Sometimes it is not what happens, but how it changes people's minds, when volunteers become involved. They develop a philosophy when they do things, and ecology is not an abstract concept," Light said. "That is the whole nature of pragmatism."

"And that is what is wonderful about coming to a bookstore to talk, to make philosophy real to people."

Shusterman came up with the idea of the monthly philosophy nights after his book *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York, Routledge, 1997) was reviewed enough to get him book-signing gigs at several Barnes & Nobles. Two years ago, he approached Marilyn Flanagan, community coordinator at the Center City store, and asked to give philosophy a shot amid her normal set of readings, workshops and children's events.

"It's been wonderful," said Flanagan. "He's creative about it. It's fun."

"Dialogue on the Square" is not all rock-and-roll and ecology, though. Shusterman has challenged his audiences to go deep sometimes, and they have responded. His most pleasant surprise was inviting University of Pennsylvania Professor Paul Guyer to talk about Immanuel Kant.

"I was a little worried, but it drew one of our largest crowds," said Shusterman. "I guess what happened was that everyone has heard of Kant, but few people could get through the density of his prose. So they wanted someone to explain it to them, sort of like a Cliff's Notes."

The usual course of a "Dialogue" is that the guest speaker talks for about 20 minutes, and then Shusterman questions him, Meet the Press-style, for an additional 25 minutes. After that, there is an audience-speaker parlay for 45 minutes.

"Like a class," he said, "90 minutes is about optimum for this."

Shusterman tries to mix his topics and speakers - the serious philosophers and the more accessible, men and women, older and younger, and of all ethnic groups. He's proud that four of his visiting speakers have been African Americans.

"We get a pretty eclectic crowd - depending, of course, on who the speaker is," said Shusterman. "We do get our share of graduate students and dowagers from the neighborhood. One woman came up to me and claimed she was my piano teacher when I was 8."

Could have been. Shusterman grew up in Olney and East Oak Lane and went to Masterman magnet school and Central High School. He graduated in 1966 at age 16. He then went off to Israel, where he stayed for the next 20 years - save for some studying and teaching in Europe. In between academics, he was an intelligence officer in the Israeli military for nearly four years.

In 1985, he took a visiting professorship at Temple and, two years later, was encouraged to come back to his hometown to teach permanently. He and his second wife, an artist, moved to Philadelphia from New York last year, after he'd been commuting for more than a decade. He contends that he is rediscovering his native grounds and especially loves being in a city where the expense of living doesn't grind down its pleasures.

"I have a house right near a wonderful park, which would be prohibitive in New York," he said. "And Temple is a great university, which encourages - almost demands - that I do things like 'Dialogue on the Square.'"

"What better life for a pragmatist?"