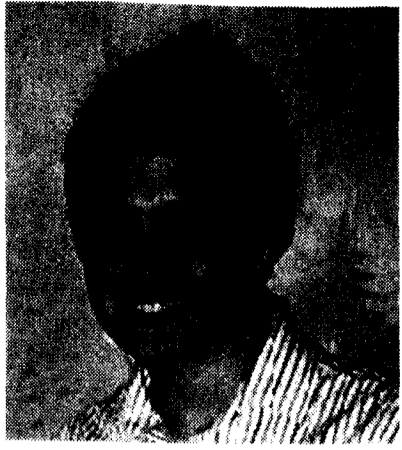


# Culturally Inept; a bi-monthly pontification



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Now that I have been in Harrisburg well over a month, my perception of this place has become slightly more apparent. However, I will spare the few of you taking the time to read this column the details of my undernourished opinion.

As for my acquaintance with capital city culture, I am very much astonished at the difference between the capital cities of Austin, Texas and

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

If you're from Texas, you know that no matter how enlightened, liberal, old fashion, or apathetic your thoughts and actions might be, a reputation of being thought of as a Bush supporter and/or a close minded individual with a southern draw proceeds you no matter where you travel; however, Austin, Texas—the home of my Alma Mater—is the exception to this rule. With a large university and several other small liberal arts colleges in its midst, many claim that the ultra-liberal population is due to the number of idealistic students that frequent the city during the school year and remain after graduation—engorged in their college life beyond the point of any control. While this may contribute to the liberal lifestyle of this city, I have a different theory, which I may choose to delineate later in my opining efforts. My point alleges that Austin, unlike the remainder of Texas is a city like no other—very liberal, radical, and—like New York—withholds a different form of entertainment for every night of the week.

While Austin is thought to be a very diverse city, I am astonished by just

how culturally mute it is compared to my new surroundings. Let me just describe some daily occurrences in my neighborhood, nearing the border of the down and mid town neighborhoods of Harrisburg. While the entirety of my day is dedicated to PHEAA—a subject I will not delve into—my evenings include a taxing array of individuals that contribute to the characteristics of what formulates my intriguing existence.

On my nights off, it is not unusual to hear, from the upstairs apartment, the Moroccan family—a mother, father, and son—bickering in their choice language. Whether the lingo is Arabic, when involving the son, or French, during parental and/or marital debacles, there is always a musical touch to what is usually an annoying attribute to apartment living. Until my recent French lessons, given to me by the feminine member of the said family, I was unable to differentiate between the different languages being spoken, but now I find myself able to comprehend the premise of their various disputes.

During times of passage—coming home from work, going

to the store, or heading out for the evening (which means going out for a night of pain relief)—I sometimes embark upon my third floor west side neighbor who is a native of Communist Poland. We often find ourselves—uncomfortably, holding our packages, laundry, or bags—engaged in conversation about the hardships she faced as a child of Communism, her continued adjustment to American culture, and/or her challenges in handling the discrimination she is faced with due to her inter-racial relationship and child. These talks are extremely thought provoking since I am native of a state where such relationships and offspring are rare—almost non-existent.

Other, more frequent, encounters occur with my across-the-street parallel neighbor who talks about his intrinsic interest in poetry and his own rendering of such, which he is working to have published. I am mystified by his job as a florist; my befuddlement originated when I found out that he went to Brown for studies in Finance and the University of Pennsylvania for his law degree. Baffled and intrigued, I remain.

Beaming my fatal flaw of being a busy body, I find myself gawking at the, man hating, single, middle aged old nurse, observing her rare visits from the members of my gender.

My most delightful encounters are from the neighborhood gang—which include my 12 year old Moroccan friend, the inter-racial 9 year old son of my Polish neighbor, a 13 year old black boy of my immediate neighbor—whom I have yet to introduce, and a 12 year old white—miniature hipster—who is of a typical white American family, occupying an entire row house a few houses down from my apartment. I tell the boys that they need a girl—a Darla—so that they can accurately replicate the “Our Gang” series.

Another matter of interest is a wonderful lesbian in her early thirties who has exposed me to the Stallions Entertainment Complex—don't even get me started on how gay this name is—which has become a venue of choice due to its judgment-free dance floor. She works to soften my heart and expose me to diversity of controversial issues. Lastly, I will introduce my floor

mate. This person, a single black mother, is amazing. With a few decadent habits lingering, she has faced adversity since she was orphaned as a child. Her life has introduced her nothing but hardship. Our conversations are fraught with topics of self-improvement, racism, parenting, fashion, and even interior design.

One might wonder why these individuals are worth remembering; well, I must say, while they are individually significant, the compilation of these individuals is what amazes me the most. All with cultural difference living together as friends and neighbors is an American triumph.

When I leave my apartment, crossing the street or driving away in my Xterra, I find myself wondering, am I just a boring white American grad student when compared to my neighbors or do I complete the culturally diverse niche that I live in? The question plagues me, but I think in a way, I've answered it in this delineation. However, no matter what, my experience in this town has already made the great move worthwhile.

# The magical worlds of I Hum 490

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“My beliefs are Shamanism. The class does not challenge my beliefs. I am open minded,” said JD Oakes, 39, from Carlisle. She is an I HUM grad student, and said the course is required for her major, and in particular for her master paper. She said Dr. Troy Thomas recommended this class to her when she had him for Art History.

A class about the occult? Magical Worlds? How did this course come about?

“It started out when Louise Hoffman, coordinator for the Interdisciplinary Humanities program, was looking for new and exciting classes for I HUM majors to attract students,” said Thomas, who created and teaches I HUM 460, Thematic Studies: Magical Worlds class, which meets Thursdays from 6:15 to 9:00 p.m., in C211 Olmsted.

Hoffman said, “I HUM courses mostly allow variation in the topic, and Dr. Thomas is one of the faculty who's very innovative in proposing new subject matter. It's always interdisciplinary and always fresh and interesting and demanding.”

Thomas created the course to “give the students the opportunity to explore magical, mystical, spiritual, fantastic, mythical, and occult, from the perspective of fine art, literature, film, theater, and music.” “I am interested in mythical things and magical; but, I do not want to stress the mythical,” he said.

He said he wants to use other areas of the arts, like film, to explore the mythical, spiritual aspects. “I am enthusiastic about having the opportunity to create the Magical Worlds course, because the material for the course is the outgrowth of my personal interests of many years,” Thomas said.

He pointed out in the Magical Worlds syllabus that in learning how cultures past and present have seen the world as magical, we also understand how humanity conceptualizes experience in ways that go beyond the rational. Because of the way the human mind functions, cultures have always seen in the world more than meets the eye. The magical is a way of understanding and

organizing experience and reality, and is fundamental to all human societies, including our own.

Thomas is associate professor of Humanities and Art History at Penn State Harrisburg, where he has taught for 30 years. His PhD. is from the University of California, Berkley, in Art History. He was born in Lancaster and lived in different places, including Europe.

Thomas brings his personal experiences into the classroom. “I deeply love each of the things we're doing in here. They are beautiful works that I deeply care about. They are works I dearly love: my first priority. I'm in my mid 60s now, and if I don't love doing it, it is not worth doing,” he said.

Thomas chose to call the class ‘magical’ as opposed to ‘spiritual’ or ‘supernatural’ because he does not want to focus on religion. Many people have the perception that the historical and anthropological appears to erode faith. He said he is suggesting that different cultures have belief systems that evolve magic powers and, that underneath them is tremendous power, political power.

“The invasion of nomadic tribes from Eastern Europe into the settled agricultural areas of the ancient Near East, when the patriarchal nomads invaded and conquered the mother goddess cults that had been established there. The religious systems of patriarchy also replaced the well-established mother goddess cult in Crete about 1300 B.C. The female deities and priestesses were replaced by (mainly) male deities or devils rather than as the positive force they had been earlier,” said Thomas.

He said this historical and political issue of power is discussed in full by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Mask of God: Occidental Mythology*.

Thomas said Campbell is the perspective from which he teaches this course. He said he is a lot like Campbell, and early on before he knew who Campbell was, he had come to the same conclusions.

He is fascinated by the commonality behind the various myths. He said he has great respect for the different systems; however, “I'm not a preacher.”

Inquiring about about angels,

Thomas said there are lots of angels in his Renaissance Art course. Inquiring about demons, elves, fairies, unicorns, he remains silent. “I'm not implying mythical religious experience is only in the past,” said Thomas. “Our culture is as full of myths today as in any time, political systems, religious systems, etc.” When questioned whether he believed in God, Thomas said he does not want to say what he personally believes. “Faith is an intimate, personal matter.”

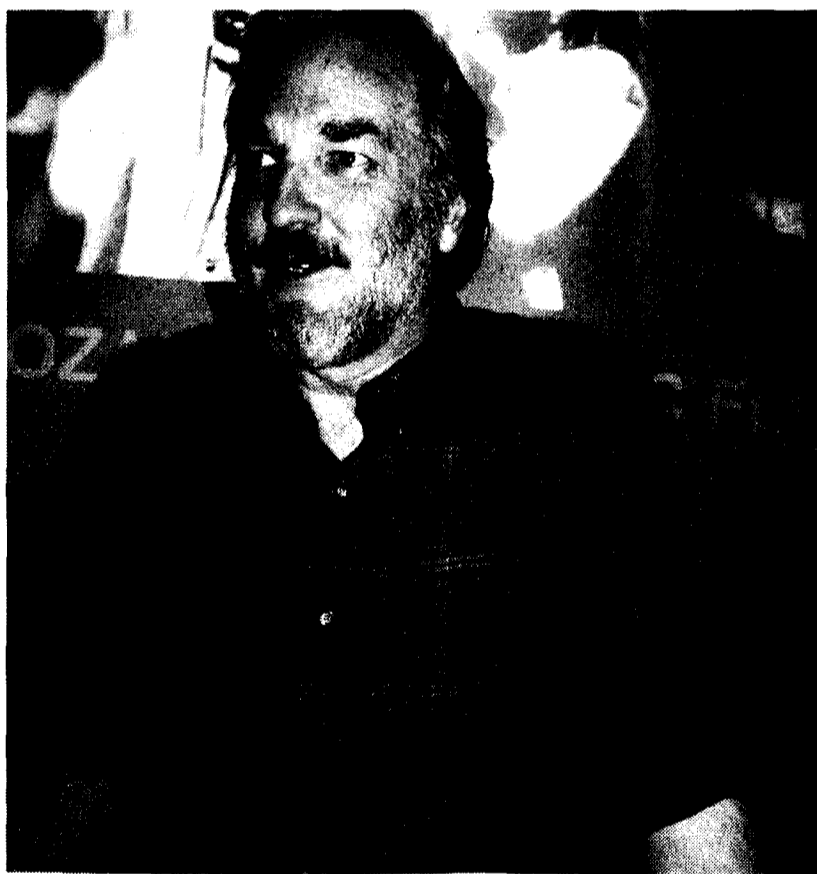


Photo courtesy of

**Dr. Troy Thomas teaches about Mozart's Magic Flute in his controversial I Hum 460: Magical Worlds.**

Thomas said, “If God spoke to humans, He did so in the Old Testament, where God had more to do in human terms. Suppose that God exists: we don't know Him, we don't know more than we know. We can study religious forms.”

Asking Thomas “what is myth?” he answered, “that's a hard one.” “One person's myth is another person's religion. There are underlying truths, such as with Isis and Osiris. They have something to tell us about our existence and dreams and psychological aspects: our deepest human fears, joys, and feelings.”

Thomas described the course's objective as “to develop a number of ideas moving organically from one topic to another. I began with Joseph Campbell and the Near East and then to Mozart. There

are similar symbols. One leads to the next. It's in the syllabus.”

In the Magical Worlds syllabus, Thomas said, “This course includes works of fine art, literature, film, theater, and music that have magical, mystical, spiritual, fantastic, mythical, or occult dimensions. In learning how cultures past and present have seen the world as magical, we also understand how humanity conceptualizes experience in ways that go beyond the rational. The magical

and in our understanding of the world.”

Thomas said when the class began he did ask students why they are taking it, as well as what their belief systems are. Some students say they are taking the course as part of their I HUM major, or to quickly fill in a Humanities requirement before they graduate. Several are taking the course by choice, with some students specifically stating they are taking the course because of their interest in the occult. There are 21 students in the class.

Jessica Miller, 28, from East Berlin, PA, is a Humanities grad student, an artist and an art educator. “I thought the class sounded interesting. I've had him for a couple of classes before, and I enjoy him. My beliefs are very open. I'm more of a spiritual person than a religious person.”

“I'm a Wiccan. The course is more artistic than I expected,” said Criminal Justice major Melissa Griffin, 35, of Harrisburg.

John DeStefano, 20, from Virginia is just this semester becoming a Philosophy major. He has all the enthusiasm of a young mind finding a new avenue of learning for the first time. He said, “I'm learning, that's why I'm here.”

“I think the thing I've gotten most is company to share deeper topics of conversation. It's fun to have people who you can talk seriously with about matters of blended history, philosophy, occult and art. Everyone seems very mature and questioning, and although we may not agree with each other, our discussions are stimulating.”

“My personal beliefs are always challenged, but not as much as a devout Christian or Muslim, etc., might be. Both sides of my family are Catholic, and I was raised in the Catholic Church, but as long as I can remember, I've never felt the way a Catholic should, or anyone that believes in a deity.”

“I don't consider myself a devil worshiper/pagan type, although learning what I'm learning, ancient paganism doesn't deserve the negative connotation it has.”

“The things we learn about the ancient world and how its peoples related to the world is a little comforting, and all knowledge challenges and expands my views and personal conclusions every day. It's very exciting.”

On Thursday at 6:15 p.m., the

students were in their seats. Thomas began to speak of last week's class, when the students viewed Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* (Ingmar Bergman's film version, 1975). He reviewed what they saw, and asked for their impressions of different segments.

He said the opera was composed in 1791, during the last year of Mozart's life. “It contains a lot of mythical symbolism on ancient Egyptian and Masonic symbolism.”

“It also relates to Campbell, in that the sun is a male symbol and the moon a female symbol.”

“We'll listen to sections again, and see parts of the DVD and still photographs of another production of the opera.”

Thomas pointed out how Mozart was ahead of his time.

“There was a sexy side of him. He was a man of the people. He lived during a time of enlightenment, when there was respect for women.”

Thomas said that Mozart was a Mason. He says a Masonic principle is that you must always tell the truth, and this is reflected in parts of the opera. He says Masons of that time also believed in universalism, brotherhood: all people were to be honored. However, there was the attitude that men were wise and women needed their guidance.

He said women were not permitted in the brotherhood because it was believed they distracted men with their wiles.

He pointed out that one minor part in the original opera had been specifically designated to a black. He said newer versions of the opera do not use a black in that role.

Then, Thomas asked the class, “Are the racial and feminist issues so distracting to you that the opera should be discarded as not having value, and should not be viewed?”

Most students do not believe the work should be discarded.

Thomas said, “Before I was married, and women accompanied me to the opera, I warned them of the anti-feminist issues in the opera.”

“Everything is political. Every action we take is political, that is why the feminist issues bother me so much.”

“We all need to work together as one, that is the underlying message of the opera.”