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arts

spotlight
Dickens is Lentz's lifelong interest

By MARIA SAWKA
 Collegian Arts Writer

Growing up in the small North Carolina town of Stony Point, Tony Lentz had dreams of anchoring the nightly news. But lately, he has been following in the footsteps of Charles Dickens rather than those of Walter Cronkite.

Lentz will be putting his skills to work and his tuxedo on for his traditional one-man reading of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* at 7:30 tonight and tomorrow night at the Nittany Lion Inn Fireside Lounge, sponsored by the Department of Speech Communication. Admission is free and there will be a cash bar.

An assistant professor of speech communication, Lentz began his academic career at the University of North Carolina, tackling a double major in speech and journalism in the hopes of becoming a television anchorman. "I enjoyed the sense of age on the campus — that there was a long tradition of education behind it," he said.

It was in his freshman year at UNC that Lentz was first exposed to what would become his trademark — an oral reading of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. "I was a green country kid in the big city," Lentz said. "I just dropped in to see it. I have vivid memories of it. A brass band in the corner, this old guy walked up and started reading. And bingo! What do you know, I saw it!"

Dickens' Christmas story had come to life in Lentz's imagination.

That old man who read and affected Lentz so profoundly was Earl Wynn, a professor at the university. Lentz came back every year to listen to Wynn's reading, and Wynn ultimately went to see Lentz read *Mark Twain*. Later the two performed together in *Fiddler On The Roof*. "We had a mutual admiration thing going," Lentz said.

"I knew the power of (Wynn's) performance," he said. "I knew I wanted to do that — to make people aware of the power of good literature and oral reading."

That interest carried over to graduate school, after a year-long stint as a newspaper reporter. "After being a full-time journalist, going to school was easy," he said. Lentz completed his master's degree and went on to the University of Michigan to complete his doctorate.

In 1978, while teaching at Wingate College, Lentz bought a copy of Dickens' classic Christmas story and started to mark it up and type it out in preparation for his first reading.

The big night came and only 10 people showed up, including an old man and his wife who thought they were going to see a play. They walked in, sat down, took a look at Lentz alone on the stage and promptly got up and left. This didn't do a lot for Lentz's self-confidence.

When Lentz came to the University seven years ago, he took over as advisor to the University Readers, a group that does three or four oral readings a semester. While looking into the history of the Readers, Lentz found out that the speech communication department had sponsored readings of *A Christmas Carol* in the 1940s and '50s. With support from the department, Lentz reserved 121 Kern Building, "a place with nice acoustics," and did his first Dickens reading for the University.

The setting for this event has moved from Kern to the Nittany Lion Inn, and the audience has gotten bigger and bigger every year, he said. The fact that when they come to hear him read, they also have to bring their imaginations along.

"This isn't always the easiest thing to do. In an age dominated by film and video, where all the images and emotions are supplied for them, people have a hard time using their imaginations," Lentz said. "When a person who's trained like that goes to look at a black mark on a page, that's all they see. They're lost."

"We're becoming a more oral culture with film and video. We're left with concrete imagery and short range views of the world. The worst thing about it is that people become less participatory. They just sit and receive what is presented," he said.

Lentz' interests in the field of speech communication extend beyond the effects of modern day video culture on literacy. He's fascinated by the history of oral tradition, how communication changed when writing was introduced and speech performance. "I'm interested in the nuts and bolts of how to make someone a performer," he said.

He cited a valiant but misdirected attempt in the 1800s to document and standardize the various gestures and postures used to convey meaning while speaking. He pulled an old, musty book from his shelf that showed sketches of people in 19th-century dress, posed in the most dramatic fashion. They even went so far as to choreograph speeches. "A lot of dance people still use the movements today," he said.

"One of my career goals is to find some way to talk about performance," he said. "How do we move to keep an audience's attention? Aren't there some basic principles we can get across to students?"

These performance skills are what Lentz and the University Readers use to get audiences involved in the literature they read. "It gets the audience to sympathize with someone else, to think about someone else's problems," he explained. "I remain concerned about that. If we lose the ability to abstract ourselves, to compromise... that sense of compromise is what makes democracy work."

Lentz will also perform at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 12 and 13 at the Gamble Mill in Bellefonte, sponsored by the Bellefonte Historical and Cultural Association.

The Daily Collegian Friday, Dec. 5, 1986—23

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