

A Hemingway

*By Norman Weinstein
Coordinator, Hemingway Year*

Scholarly conferences about great literary figures can tend to be rather lifeless affairs. One can expect papers to be read, chairs of various English departments to exchange pleasantries over cocktails, lots of tributes to the long shadow of a great author.

Forget this stereotype when you think about BSU's massive two day and night Hemingway conference held in early March.

Think about the fact that the audience came not only from Idaho, but from Iowa, Michigan, Washington. Requests for conference brochures came from as far away as the University of Calcutta, India. A student from a university in Austria attended all events, a fact all the more miraculous when one considers that she heard about the conference at a local bus terminal in the middle of the night before the conference opened the next morning. Audiences represented all ages, all backgrounds on campus and in the community. And audiences were hungry for information about this writer who is undergoing a national revival in this quarter century since his death.

Two packed days and nights of talks, concerts, and film are impossible to describe in a brief article. What I can supply are glimpses, snapshots, crystalized moments.

The first image is the gigantic canvas banner decorating the Student Union Ballroom where all conference events were held. Painted on the banner was the same logo of Hemingway emblazoned on brochures related to the Hemingway Year. This larger-than-life Hemingway head seemed to cryptically smile down upon the speakers and audiences, a puzzling Buddha-head viewing the proceedings in his honor with pride? With bemusement? Who can say? And the same stylized Hemingway profile appeared on cakes as icing patterns, a treat from Vo-Tech Culinary Arts students mobilized to create dessert for the hundreds who attended in the wee hours of the morning or evening.

The Hemingway cake and banner images took on a particular resonance as the author's son, Jack Hemingway, rose to stage center to begin the conference. The generations of Hemingway were alive and well in Idaho that day.

Another image drawn from this conference involves the looks of pleasure on the faces of the various speakers as they



"I appreciate the honor being bestowed by this university on my father. To have a year of Hemingway is a very special event."

Author Jack Hemingway



"Hemingway believed that the dignity of the movement of an iceberg derives from the fact that seven eighths of it is underwater. So he would write in a way which only shows you the surface of the action. You have to be sensitive and perceptive enough to read what is really going on beneath that level of action. That is what makes Hemingway such fun to teach — because beginning students often don't see what is going on beneath the surface."

Critic James Nagel

Celebration

fielded provocative audience questions. "Wow! I wish my students back in Pennsylvania asked questions this perceptively," said Linda Miller from Penn State University. "These audiences seem so thirsty for every bit of knowledge I have to share with them about Hemingway," claimed Ann Putnam from the University of Washington. Speaker after speaker noted the intensity of thoughtful listening going on throughout these two days and nights.

Hemingway Society President James Nagel was scholarly without being stuffy, brilliant in his comparison of war as portrayed by Stephen Crane and Hemingway.

Theologian Lynda Sexson saw Hemingway as a brave spiritual visionary attempting to reconcile some of the most perplexing contradictions in American life.

And as if that weren't enough for one day, critic Leslie Fiedler brought his bountiful wit and acid charms to a dissection of the Hemingway legend.

Then composer, poet, and Spanish Civil War veteran Ed Balchowsky performed the songs of the Spanish war — a conflict in which he lost his right arm while serving as a volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade — and it sounded at times as if two men were pounding the keyboards. And finally, Balchowsky and his fellow volunteers in Spain came to life on the movie screen as the documentary about Americans fighting for the Republic in Spain, *The Good Fight*, was shown to an exhausted but rapt audience.

Critic Linda Miller was warmly personal while being intellectually biting in critiquing narrow feminist interpretations of Hemingway — all the while presenting a foundation for a fresh feminist reading of Papa.

Idaho poet and editor Richard Ardinger illuminated the sometimes tense and often supportive relationship between Ezra Pound and Hemingway.

Do you have the image in your imagination of a lot of Hemingway fanatics pretty tuckered out?

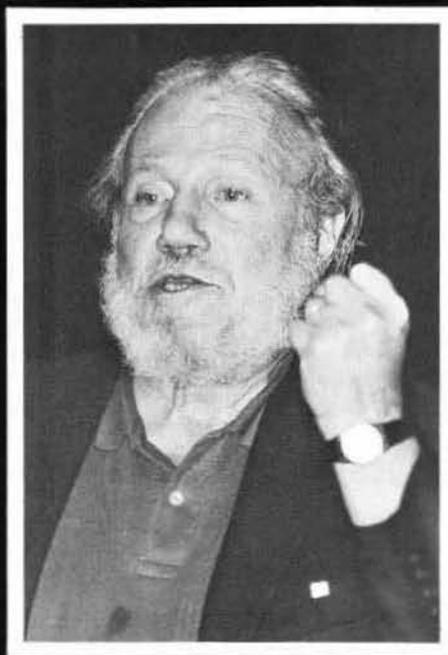
But the next day proved just as packed with wonders. Critic Ann Putnam talked about Hemingway's problematic relation to place and how he tended to be nostalgic about where he wasn't on earth at a particular moment.

The Spanish born artist Francesc Torres showed numerous slides of his anti-war works and talked about how the Spanish Civil War shaped his political and artistic consciousness.



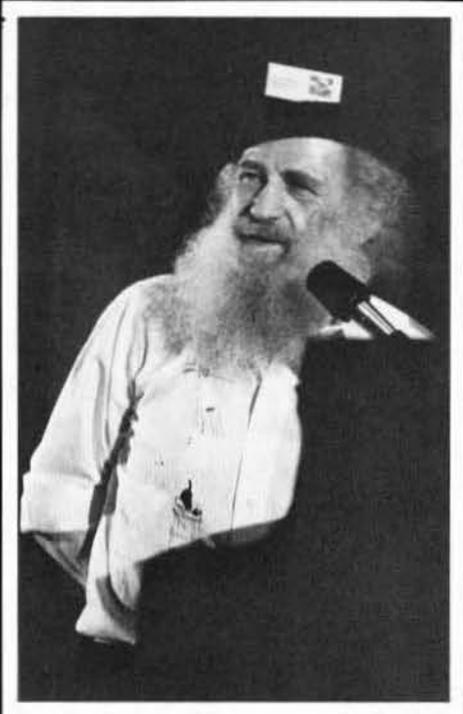
"I'm not looking at Hemingway's art and pointing a finger and saying: 'Aha, sexism!' Actually, I'd like to challenge this too narrow view and replace it with a more encompassing one. We must resist the stereotyped view of Hemingway's world as one of machismo. We must acknowledge the cultural context of the time when Hemingway was writing."

Critic Linda Miller



"I had the very disturbing experience of visiting Hemingway in Ketchum shortly before his death. That experience left me so shattered that I went home and lined up my then six children and told them: 'Please promise me that none of you will ever become a writer.' There is a price to be paid for living so long with the savor of death on one's own tongue."

Critic Leslie Fiedler



"I have a lot to say about Hemingway now. All these years I haven't given too much thought to him. I have four wives, three kids and three grandkids, and I was on the street for thirty years. I tell people who criticize Hemingway's lifestyle: 'Tell me about your lifestyle. Now tell me about what Hemingway produced and left behind. Now what are YOU leaving behind?' I balance a man's lifestyle against what he does."

Composer, Poet, Spanish Civil War Veteran Ed Balchowsky

"I'm glad I was asked to talk about the relationship between Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway because Idaho likes to claim them as our writers. We feel that because one was born here and the other died here that they somehow have roots here, that their art springs from this country."

Poet-Editor Richard Ardinger

Cuban born poet Ricardo Pau-Llosa, also armed with carousels of slides of art works not normally seen in Idaho, painted a richly complex portrait of the cultural atmosphere in Cuba during the two decades that Hemingway resided there.

And last and I hope not least, I presented a talk on Hemingway's relationship to classic Russian literature, a talk prepared hurriedly the night before since the two scheduled speakers from the U.S.S.R. Embassy in Washington had to cancel the night before the conference.

The final image I carry of the two day event? I think of folksingers Nanci Griffith and Rosalie Sorrels singing songs of courage and conscience to the crowd of nearly 600 in the Ballroom.

This was the icing on the cake — all of which had disappeared into 600 bellies by this time.

What BSU gave the community through this two day tour de force was a sense of the multiple dimensions of Hemingway, man and artist. The cake might have only lasted two days — but the thinking provoked by this event will hopefully linger in years ahead. □

"Hemingway lived in the outskirts of Havana between 1940 and 1960. There are all sorts of speculations about why Hemingway lived so long in Cuba. We know he was not in Cuba with the purpose of contacting Cuban writers and painters. During those years in Cuba Hemingway turned inward toward the cultivation of memory."

Poet-Art Critic Richard Pau-Llosa

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