

Writer makes return to his literary roots

BY DIANE BRODERICK
Staff writer

Today, author Ron Block will return to a room where he used to read the books of Nebraska authors.

But Block will not be just an admirer in Bennett Martin Public Library's Heritage Room, as he once was as an undergraduate student in the '70s.

Tonight Block will read for about an hour from his two books, "Dirty Shame Hotel" and "Dismal River: A Narrative Poem," as a participant in the John H. Ames Reading Series.

Block, an instructor at Mid-Plains Community College in North Platte,

Literature Preview The Facts



What: Reading by author Ron Block
Where: Bennett Martin Library, 136 S. 14th St., Heritage Room
When: Tonight at 7:30
Cost: Free
The Skinny: Former UNL student returns to Lincoln for reading series

will read both fiction short stories and poetic fiction tonight starting at 7:30.

His most recent work, "Dirty Shame Hotel," is a collection of short stories that was published in 1998 by the New Rivers Press in Minneapolis. Block said it has a combination of several styles.

"I bring a lot of contrasts to my writing," Block said. "I write things that are sometimes folksy and sometimes bizarre."

Block said he's excited to return to his college base and see some of his old haunts.

"I used to go to Bennett Martin all the time and hang out in the Heritage Room," he said.

The Heritage Room operates as the home base for the John H. Ames series, which is dedicated to the accomplishments of Nebraska authors.

The forum allows local writers the opportunity to perform their pieces in front of a live audience, engage listeners and conduct a dialogue with a crowd usually full of students and other writers, Heritage Room curator Vicki Clarke said.

The room lies on the top floor of the Bennett Martin Library, 136 S. 14th St., and features a collection of books by and about Nebraska authors.

Although certainly a local talent, Block hasn't been hanging around Nebraska his entire life. He attended graduate school at Syracuse University in New York, and has taught at Marquette University in Milwaukee and North Dakota State University in Fargo.

But his home state has stayed a big part of his life since his childhood in Gothenburg, he said.

His book "Dismal River: A Narrative Poem," published in 1990 by New Rivers Press, is a book-length poem about a boat ride down the Dismal River, which winds through the Sandhills in Nebraska.

Although the work is largely fictional, it reflects influences he received from his father, Block said.

Though he currently teaches in North Platte, he said he is unsure where he will end up in the next couple of years.

But one thing is certain: He will relish the time he gets to spend tonight in the room where he used to enjoy the words of Weldon Kees and others.



MIKE WARREN/DN

ROBERT VIVIAN, a doctoral student in English, writes dark and powerful plays while maintaining a modest and unassuming personality. Vivian has chosen to remain in Nebraska to do his writing instead of opting for the more well-known playwright communities such as New York.

Candid works mark area author

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior staff writer

When Kay Vivian read "Murmurs of California," she was surprised to see her marriage dramatized for the stage.

The play, written by her husband, Robert Vivian, was based on her relationships with her husband and father.

"I said, 'Bob, you can't do this. You're basically airing our dirty laundry,'" Kay Vivian said.

But after reading the play again, she realized it was too good to pass over.

She liked it so much she ended up playing the part modeled after herself in a production of the play at the Shelterbelt theater in Omaha.

And she wasn't disappointed.

People were blown away by the honesty and reality of the work, said Matt Thompson, who played the role modeled after Robert.

"You can't bastardize that honesty. He uses real words to describe real feelings to discuss real subjects," Thompson said.

Robert Vivian, an Omaha playwright studying for a doctorate at the University of Nebraska-



Resident Writers

A semesterlong look at Nebraska literary culture and the people who create it.

Lincoln, is known for his honest, cutting-edge plays, 20 of which have been produced Off- and Off-Off Broadway.

And in a state with a relatively limited community for new theater, Vivian forges ahead with his dark, gritty plays, refusing to give in to more commercial drama.

"I suppose I don't trust face value at all when it comes to people. I don't know myself that well, and I don't think hardly anyone does. Anyone who says, 'I know exactly how I would act in this context,' I am suspicious of," Vivian explained.

Vivian's cynical attitude comes straight across in his plays with their high emotional stakes and eerily

Please see VIVIAN on 10

DARK KPA SSA GES

Play seeks out truths in poet's life

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior staff writer

"Mad, bad and dangerous."

One of Lord Byron's many lovers once used these three words to describe the legendary poet.

Others have called him a dandy, a lunatic and a nymphomaniac.

But most of all, he's been called one of the greatest poets of the Romantic period.

This weekend, the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance explores the man behind the myth. In "Childe Byron," the University of Nebraska-Lincoln brings the historic figure and the shadows of his past to life.

"Childe Byron," a play by Romulus Linney, focuses on the relationship between Byron and his only legitimate daughter, Ada.

In the play, Ada, who was

estranged from her father during his lifetime, is writing her will. After reviling the memory of her father most of her life, Ada confronts their relationship by summoning him to life.

The play struggles to find the truths behind the rumors that plagued Byron during and after his life.

"Byron wasn't this biased, psychotic, sex-crazed poet," said Amy Jirsa, a member of the cast. "Anyone who can write poetry like that had to have a softer side."

In the play, Ada tries to come to terms with Byron's stormy love life, his incestuous affair with his sister and the overall drunken revelry of his life.

She questions his legend the same way academics have questioned it.

Jude Hickey, who plays Byron, said approaching such a legendary character intimidated him.

"There's a character already built that I have to live up to in a way," he

Theatre Preview The Facts



What: "Childe Byron"
Where: Studio Theatre
When: 8 p.m. tonight through Saturday, Feb. 23-27
Cost: \$6 for students, \$9 for faculty/staff/senior citizens, \$10 for general admission
The Skinny: Lord Byron's only legitimate daughter struggles to come to terms with her father's legacy

said.

But the center of this play is not Byron's licentious background, cast members said. The play focuses on the relationship between Ada and her father.

"The core of the text is two people who grew up without parents, and how they're affected by it," said Greg Peters, another cast member.

Patricia Behrendt, who directs the play, said it explores the outside forces that affect a family.

"It's a vision of how people try to heal themselves when they experience a loss in their lives," she said.

Byron tries to bring these contemporary themes to life within its historic framework.

In order to prevent the play from becoming a period piece, Behrendt said, the technical elements are not completely definitive of time and place.

Colors, for example, are characteristic of the roles the actors play instead of the time period.

"This play is intensely modern in spirit. We didn't want to get too grounded in period. If we get too grounded, we lose the modern themes," she said.

And there's no doubt that Byron, still an icon today, was way ahead of