

Sharing stories

“**B**AKHTIN said all books are a dialogue waiting to happen. That place was a whole series of conversations.”

So says Richard Cupidi of the late lamented Public House Bookshop, formerly of Little Preston Street, which closed its doors for good on May Day 1999.

He is sharing his memories of the shop and inviting others to share their stories in an event which premiered at Bom-Bane's in George Street, Brighton, last summer.

With its unique filing system – largely ignoring genre, with all books simply placed in alphabetical order – and an ordering system based around personal passions, the Public House Bookshop was as far from today's Waterstones and WHSmiths as can be imagined.

“We never opened up intending it to be a business,” says Cupidi. “We followed the Red River school of economics – run very fast and don't look down!”

“The universities used us in courses on management as an example of how businesses could be run outside of formal patterns.”

The shop opened in the summer of 1973 on the site of a Victorian pub, in what today would be described as a “soft” opening.

Individual interests

“People wandered in all the time wondering what was going on,” remembers Cupidi, who now works as a hypnotherapist.

“It was a lovely way to have a library.”

The shop was run as a co-operative, with everyone having equal say in how it was run and what stock was ordered.

“Usually we would gather in the basement once a month with a large quantity of beer and home-made salsa,” remembers Cupidi, a New England native who came to Brighton for a weekend and fell in love with the city.

“We would plan out all our orders for the following month and generally have a good time. The social, cultural and economical were never divorced.

“It was all about what we were interested in individually – there were always new streams and interests and territories being incorporated.

“A great deal of time and effort was spent to make sure we had books we regarded as important. We didn't carry any dreck – airline fodder or high-street material. There were other places for that.”

Cupidi served coffee in the shop – many years before Costa started moving into bookshops.

And the filing system meant customers were continually making new discoveries.

“We let people hunt for what they wanted,” says

RICHARD CUPIDI

Brighton Dome Founders Room, Church Street, Sunday, May 5

Cupidi. “People looking for one particular book would come across other books they would never have come across otherwise.”

The basement also provided a community and performance space, and was used by the founders of the city's Natural Health Centre, as well as alternative newspaper Brighton Voice.

In the last decade of the shop's life it became a Native American art gallery – following Cupidi's own passion – but not before it had hosted a number of visiting poets, speakers and performers, including Lee Harwood, Allen Ginsberg, Iain Sinclair, Max Eastley, David Toop and Bob Copping.

It was the end of the Net Book Agreement – meaning shops could charge what they liked for books – which led to Cupidi closing the shop.

“When that disappeared in the mid-1990s it was the writing on the wall,” says Cupidi. “Waterstones and Borders were getting bigger and longer-term there was the rise of the internet and Amazon.

“A year before we closed, we sat down to see if there was anything we could do to make a difference. Within six months we could see it was impossible.”

He is proud of the fact the shop closed having paid all its debts, so no one was out of pocket.

“We went out the way we started – smiling. We had a party to celebrate the closure. There was lots of beer and salsa and people telling stories.”

He believes the spirit of the shop remains in city institutions such as the radical social centre The Cowley Club, in London Road, and Bom-Bane's.

“A lot of people come and talk to me saying they miss it as a venue,” he says.

“We have one or two people coming down on the day who were instrumental in the bookshop – and we will open the afternoon up to anyone's personal recollections and experiences.

“It's about storytelling. It's not an exercise in nostalgia, it's an exercise in the human spirit.

“If anyone takes anything away from the event it is that the spirit continues whatever form or shape it comes in. I hope it will be an inspirational afternoon.”

Duncan Hall

essential info

Starts 3pm, tickets £8. Call 01273 709709



Valentijn Dhaenens
Photo by Maya Wilsens



WHEN French troops were killed in Afghanistan and Nicholas Sarkozy was the country's president, he had to make a speech to the families of the deceased.

The requirement was to give some meaning and comfort to those left behind.

Few would recognise that he borrowed lines and ideas from a speech made 2,500 years ago by Pericles. The Athenian politician was addressing a crowd at the annual public funeral for the war dead at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC).

The connection did not escape the Belgian actor and member of the SKaGeN theatre school collective Valentijn Dhaenens, who says the oratory trade has changed very little in 2,000 years.

“I saw sentences Sarkozy had learnt from Pericles. Those speeches haven't changed from the time of the ancient Greeks. When a soldier dies, you have to have comfort. We have not found another way to say that. It is always

BIGMOUTH
Corn Exchange, Church Street, Brighton, Thursday, May 9, to Saturday, May 11

that the death had a meaning, for God and for the future of the country.”

The big difference is today's politicians no longer talk for hours. Speeches run for lines instead of hundreds of pages.

It was in 1960s America when things changed most profoundly.

“There are more catchy phrases. They have been shortened for the media. When Obama talks, he starts with a joke to get the audience on his side and then he'll say something difficult. He uses all the tricks.”

Dhaenens read a thousand landmark speeches with world historical importance in a year.

“I promised myself I would read one a day but I ended up reading a few more than 1,000. I didn't have a concept in the beginning. I was hoping that the speeches would start

communicating with each other.”

One speech which stood out was by German propagandist Goebbels, made in Munich to encourage women and children to get involved in the war.

“It is hysterical what he is saying but it is so well written. He used these long, beautifully-written sentences. A few months later I was reading General Patton's D-Day speech.

“He needed to get the men over their fear. Most of those guys had never shot a gun. He used aggressive language, short sentences.

A way with words

“I read them months apart but it was funny how they began to communicate with each other.”

Other shows Dhaenens has done with SKaGeN – a multi-disciplinary, Antwerp-based group whose focus is to self-produce without stage managers and playwrights – include adaptations of Albert Camus's work, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's Voyage Au Bout De La Nuit, and a play in the Belgian city's train station

at rush hour with the audience hidden on a balcony with headphones while the cast wandered among commuters.

“I wanted to do a show by myself, a monologue, something more intuitive that I could learn by heart,” adds the Flemish speaker, who also speaks French, English and German so well that he can tour all three countries painlessly.

He decided to make a show using only his voice. He sings and delivers the speeches on five different microphones programmed to sound like a sports stadium with a bad PA or a tinny horn.

“It's amazing how someone with only his voice can change the course of history. In one big position in history a man can have the talent to say things to put thousands of people behind him. I am still amazed by that.

“With a talent for rhetoric, you can change world history.”

Dominic Smith

Starts 8pm Friday, 9pm Thursday and Saturday. Tickets £15/£12.50. Call 01273 709709