

Writers on Tape

BY JEANNE FINLEY

At the New York State Writers Institute, the walls in the “Sardi’s Room” may not speak—but the writers do. Institute director Donald Faulkner named the room after the famous Manhattan restaurant decorated with drawings of celebrities, because two of the walls are covered top to bottom with framed posters that advertise Albany appearances by some of the world’s most important authors. Yet these are less than 10% of the novelists, poets, filmmakers, screenwriters, historians, playwrights, journalists, and critics who have visited the Institute, located at the University at Albany, since its founding in 1983—over 1,000 to date. Among them, they have won every major literary, film, and theater award in the world, from the Nobel to the Tonys and Oscars, from Britain’s Booker Prize to America’s National Book Award. Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, Allen Ginsberg, Kurt Vonnegut, Frank McCourt, Grace Paley, Hunter Thompson, Spike Lee, and Annette Gordon Reed, this year’s Pulitzer Prize winner for history, are just a few of the famous faces represented on the walls.

For each writer, however, there is also a tape: over 4,000 hours of audiocassettes



NEW YORK STATE WRITERS INSTITUTE ARCHIVES

Writers Institute founder William Kennedy and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, 1984.

and videotapes make up a unique recorded archive of the literary heritage of New York State and the nation. So this year, on the 25th anniversary of its founding, the Writers Institute is both celebrating its accomplishments and attending to its historical legacy. In partnership with UAlbany’s Information Technology Services and the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, the Institute will preserve, reformat, and document its entire tape collection, and then make it available on its website. “We’ve kept the lid on the tapes all these years for fear of use damage, and now we want

to release them all at once,” says Don Faulkner, describing the ambitious project as the electronic component of a research library and comparing it to a “literary piñata.”

The first step of the two-year effort is to preserve the earliest audiocassette recordings (1983–1995), which are at greatest risk of loss. The subjects of some of these recordings, like novelists John Updike and Norman Mailer, have recently died. Other tapes document the last public appearance of an author, like fiction writer/poet Raymond Carver in 1987. But there are media offerings too: over 400 episodes of the original *Public Radio Book Show*, a half-hour



Posters from twenty-five years' worth of author appearances at the Institute decorate an office dubbed the "Sardi's Room."

interview program of visiting authors discussing their books, broadcast throughout the U.S. and Australia from 1988 to 1995. Created by the Institute and co-produced with NPR affiliate WAMC-FM, *The Book Show* was hosted until 1994 by the Institute's first director, Tom Smith, and then for a year by fiction writer Douglas Glover. (It continues today, wholly produced by WAMC). More than fifty episodes of *The Writer*, a half-hour series of video portraits of Institute guests produced by PBS affiliate WMHT-TV and broadcast from 1998 to 2001, helped inaugurate the Institute's "digital age," complemented by hundreds of informal one-on-one video interviews, produced in-house, of authors discussing their literary roots and influences. To these, the Institute adds about 100 hours of footage from each year's Visiting Writers Series.

In 2008, UAlbany gave the Institute seed money from its Digital Initiative program to digitize some of the earliest audiotapes. This year, the university is sponsoring a fundraising campaign—the

first in the Institute's history—for the larger preservation project, and the Institute is pursuing grant funding. Assistant Director Suzanne Lance says the project perfectly fits the Institute's mission: "It extends our reach beyond New York to global access. If you can't get to Albany, you can still participate in the Institute's programs in some way." Some videos are already on the website—and on YouTube.

The Institute's mission is both cultural and educational, as befits its home within a university: to celebrate the literary arts, and to encourage the development of writing skills at all levels of education throughout the state. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Kennedy began the Institute in 1983 with seed money from his MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellowship. The university matched the funds—which, says Kennedy, "went like a buttered bullet... [Saul] Bellow, who knew me when I was a starving writer, said to me, 'You get a little money and you turn into a patron of the arts.'" By 1984, Kennedy's ability to lure the

top names in the literary world to Albany, and the impressive size of the audiences they drew, helped transform the original "Writers Institute at Albany" into the New York State Writers Institute, a statewide "literary crossroads" mandated under New York's arts and culture law in an unusual collaboration between the state legislature and Governor Mario Cuomo. Don Faulkner, previously a professor of English at Yale, took over as director in fall 1995 after the untimely death of Tom Smith, Kennedy's friend and English Department colleague. In 2000, the Institute was designated by Congress as a Local Legacies Project to help celebrate the Library of Congress' bicentennial.

Over twenty-five years, the Institute has expanded its programs to become a writer's (and reader's) dream. Its current offerings, most of which are free, include a classic film series, augmented with appearances by directors and screenwriters; two summer writing programs; the biennial New York State Author and Poet awards; semester-long workshops by writers in residence; sponsorship of conferences, a literary journal, and a small press; the Author's Theatre, which stages readings of new plays; and a writing fellows program—as well as all those visiting authors, who continue to add their likenesses to the "Sardi's Room" and their words to the Institute's irreplaceable archive of literary conversations. ■



Director Donald Faulkner brought the Institute into its "digital age," supervising the creation of its first website in 1996 and beginning the video archive under the direction of a former student from Yale, now a documentary filmmaker.

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