Yevgeny Yevtushenko Visits Indiana University-South Bend

On October 7, the Office of International Programs at IU-SB presented the renowned Russian poet and cultural and political figure Yevgeny Yevtushenko in a reading of his poetry in the Main Auditorium of the South Bend campus. Yevtushenko's visit to Indiana University was co-sponsored by the IU-SB Division of Arts and Sciences, Division of Arts, the World Affairs Council of Michiana, and the Departments of English and SPEA, as well as by IU-B's Office of International Programs and the Russian and East European Institute. The poetry reading by Yevtushenko was followed by a booksigning and reception.

Gabrielle Robinson, Director of International Programs at IU-South Bend and a scholar of comparative literature, commented upon the special significance of Yevtushenko's work, which has been translated into over 70 languages. "Growing up during World War II and coming to maturity at the end of the Stalin era, Yevtushenko has spent his life speaking out against the taboo subjects of his day—against censorship and anti-semitism, and for freedom of speech and religion, and the right to emigrate." One of Yevtushenko's chief themes throughout his career is dealing with the legacy of the Stalin era, as can be seen in his poem "The Heirs of Stalin" or his 1991 film, Stalin's Funeral, with Vanessa Redgrave. Dr. Robinson notes that Yevtushenko became the voice of the post-Stalin era, freely criticizing political and social repression, but also firm in his faith in national renewal and the spiritual strength of the Russian people. She emphasizes, however, that "for as much as Yevtushenko lashed out against everything he considered wrong, his poetry has been even more passionate in its praise of vitality, wonder, enchantment, love, and life."

Throughout his life and work, Dr. Robinson observes, "Yevtushenko has sought to break down barriers and obliterate walls between countries and people. Reflecting his conviction that 'frontiers are in my way,' Yevtushenko's poetry has dissolved frontiers between East and West, and between individuals as well." Yevtushenko's poetry also reflects this more expansive approach in regard to artistic form. "On one hand, Yevtushenko maintains his Russian and specifically his Siberian heritage. He says that the taiga, or landscape of Siberia, was his first teacher and that together with the folk rhymes of its people, it informs much of his work. But Yevtushenko's work also echoes the rhythms and ideas of poets across frontiers, such as Villon and Whitman."

Carrying on the Russian tradition of oral poetry, Yevtushenko has visited over 90 countries, reading his work in all sorts of public forums—factories, offices, and schools. During his artistic and political career, Yevtushenko has addressed tens of thousands in stadiums and squares, stating that "I chose the public platform as the battlefield on which to defend my views." As Dr. Robinson points out, Yevtushenko once wrote:

A poet is always in danger when he lives too safely.

Living too safely has never been a problem for Yevtushenko, as he was branded an enemy of the party and expelled from the university in 1956 for defending a banned novel. Later his passport was withdrawn after he published his Precocious Autobiography in France. In summing up Yevtushenko's contribution to modern literature, Robinson says, "He is an artist with a breadth of vision, energy, and courage which is evident throughout his life and work." Yevtushenko, who turned sixty this year, is a prodigious writer—having published 46 books of poetry, as well as novels, essays, short stories, screenplays, and two books of photography.