

McDermott explores depths of being

By LIZ NEWLIN

Battalion Staff

Only the dead sleep through John J. McDermott's lectures.

As one student testified going into a class on a recent Thursday morning: "If you're asleep, his ranting and raving will wake you up."

He does keep your attention.

His New York City accent spews across the classroom like water hitting a fan: A drop sparkles, catches and reveals the light, then is followed by another drop and another. Frequent side-trips through history — like tracing the development of the East-West division of the Catholic Church from the 12th Century to Pope John Paul II in two minutes — make note-taking all but impossible.

It's fortunate that he places half a dozen new pieces of chalk in the blackboard tray before calling roll. Many end up on the table or in his pockets, and others shatter on the blackboard as he scribbles — often in Greek, Hebrew or Latin — to define his lectures.

Punctuating his quick sentences are guttural "Ehs?" and jabs in the air. After instructing more than 20,000 students in his 28-year career, McDermott, the head of Texas A&M's Philosophy and Humanities Department, has learned how to teach. His ability was recognized by the E. Harris

Harbison National Award for Gifted Teaching in 1970. He taught at Queens College for 25 years, as well as publishing some 25 articles in journals and volumes of essays.

He's trying to break through the mind-set that many of his Texas A&M students grew up with: a conservative, self-satisfied attitude that rarely sees beyond suburbia and a pleasant childhood. It's not evil; it's just limiting.

He makes that point in almost every lecture.

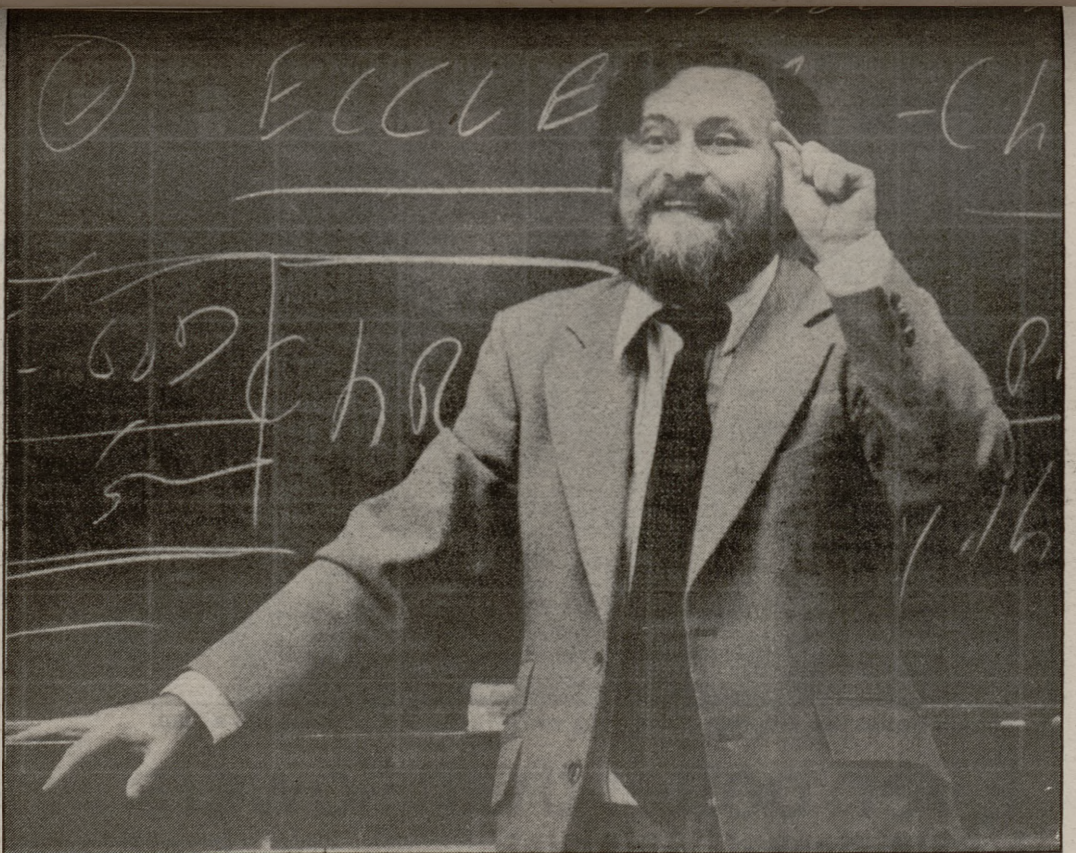
For example, in a discussion of early Christianity McDermott said, "I myself am highly dubious about the existence of God. But I'm not an atheist. That would be the height of pretense. It would involve areas of experience to which we do not have access, all that is known and all that is unknown." Then he pauses and smiles slightly.

"Even being here at Texas A&M does not do that."

The students laugh with McDermott, and maybe, he hopes, begin to see beyond their cultural blinders. (Later in the lecture, he tells the students there is only one religion to practice: a deep religion, one they seek to understand and believe.)

Students are not his only target: In his recent Faculty Lecture, sponsored by the University, he aimed directly at Texas A&M and other universities.

"We stand today on the edge of another great battle," he told the



John J. McDermott

jam-packed lecture hall in Rudder Tower. The battle, he said, is between studying philosophy, humanities and the other "liberal arts," and studying only engineering, business and other "vocational arts" with an eye to a money-making career.

Don't get McDermott wrong. He doesn't want everybody to devote his life to philosophy as he has. He just wants them to think, to discover that thinking can reveal the depth of being human.

"Philosophy teaches us that every day," he said at the University lecture. "Everyone has access to the depth of being human. We should not await salvation, while the parade passes by."

"The nectar of a guaranteed human future is illusory and the height of self-deception. Our death is imminent."

Philosophy, he says, can make the life before that death meaningful.

McDermott's words are strong. But he is not simply a man of words.

"I'm committed to two things," he said from his book-lined office. "It's a double-pronged fork — improving the quality of liberal arts and, secondly, to bring the importance of

the liberal arts to the University at large."

To those ends, during his three years here he's served on several of the University committees that oversee education and curriculum, as well as brought more than 200 philosophers to Texas A&M from across the country.

"They are extremely impressed with the size and quality of the physical plant (campus)," he said of the philosophers. "They are also impressed with the cooperation of the University administration and the college administration with the philosophy program here."

Texas A&M — through its philosophy department — comes across as a place where ideas are taken seriously, displacing its image as a cow-college, he said.

While at Texas A&M, the professors usually present a lecture on philosophy and meet with the philosophy professors here. Few students are involved, he said, simply because they don't come. But the missionary effect, as they attempt to broaden interest in philosophy on this campus, is still impressive.

"I broke stereotypes one after another," he said, chuckling. "Especially with my Jewish friends from the East, you could hear the stereotypes breaking like crystal."

McDermott is something of a risk for the University because he does upset conventions. For example, he has led the fight to include a group of free electives in all University curriculums.

Another professor at Texas A&M, Dr. Norman Grabo, said of that risk: "The administration ought to be commended. This is part of a very concerted policy on the part of the administration to bring into the University and encourage things they don't always understand and aren't always comfortable with — like McDermott."

Grabo said McDermott's University lecture was remarkably enjoyable for such a scholarly work. In a little more than 50 minutes, McDermott traced the development of Western thought from Plato to William James. He made the case for philosophy and its function in the world.

"He's an outstanding lecturer — very dramatic, almost acting out parts of it because he feels them so strongly," Grabo said.

"What struck me about the lecture ... was that the crowd showed great diversity. It was divided about evenly between students and faculty and his acquaintances.

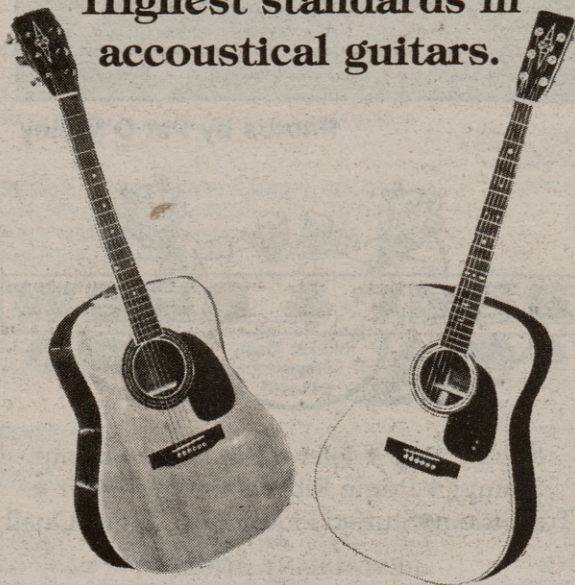
"Some of what he said might appear surprising to an A&M audience in that he insists on the central importance of Karl Marx as the most important thinker in the world." But, Grabo said, he was getting people to think in a new, surprising way. "That is the end of philosophy, to make people's minds more flexible."

Grabo and other faculty members who attended the lecture agreed it was an event good for Texas A&M, that it shows Texas A&M can pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

"Anyone who teaches liberal arts who was there came away reinvigorated," said Dr. Michael Levy, a theorist in the political science department. "One friend of mine said he wanted to go home and revise all his lectures. McDermott translated a love of his subject."

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