

SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● Kumar and Lustig

What began in 1980 as a chance meeting between two men from diverse cultural backgrounds has blossomed into a full-fledged friendship while affording University of Oklahoma students a unique learning experience.

India's noted poet and critic Shiv Kumar and renowned Czech novelist, film and short story writer Arnost Lustig first met as jurors for OU's Neustadt International Prize for Literature. This year, as visiting professors of English, they have been guiding OU students in their shared professional love: creative writing.

"Writing is a small but most enduring contribution toward the civilization of man," says Lustig. "It exists to give man hope in himself. The world is falling apart every second and has to be put back together every day."

Kumar, who defines poetry as "a psychic record of our past experience," notes that one of his earliest poems was "My Mother's Death Anniversary," an "anguished remembrance of someone departed."

For Lustig, recollections of the past mean recounting the horrors of the Holocaust, the central theme of his works. As a European-born Jewish adolescent, his youth was consumed by the struggle for survival in three Nazi concentration camps, living amid unbelievable human cruelty and confronting several near-misses with death.

Both men clearly are artists dedicated to the art of writing.

"What most people don't understand about writers is the amount of hard labor that goes into their work," Kumar says. "The paradoxical thing is one can write for 12 hours a day and not feel tired. I call it the joy of creation."

Lustig, the author of 13 novels, agrees with Kumar that writing is difficult, and to illustrate his point, drew an analogy of a writer to a trapeze artist. "The trapeze artist has to exercise 12 hours a day, then he performs for 30 seconds. When he performs, he has to be in absolute control of all his senses. If not, he falls. There is no net under any writer!"

As dedicated as Kumar and Lustig are to their writing, they possess a

nearly equal fondness for teaching. "Teaching young people is such a joyful undertaking," says Kumar, "but a teacher must relate what he is teaching to life to be successful."

Lustig, who tells his students to "try to write so that 20 years later you won't be ashamed," describes two kinds of silence in a classroom. "There is polite silence of students and teacher, and there is another silence when students really listen—a meaningful silence. If you reach this, you know this is a class!"

Educated at Cambridge University, Kumar did not begin writing poetry seriously until the age of 49. When he left the University of Hyderabad in India in 1980, he was vice chancellor of the university, dean of the school of humanities and professor and chairman of the department of English.

"A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova," his prize-winning best-seller, is the story of a beautiful young Jewish ballerina and her confrontation with Nazi captors. It is a book Lustig hopes to see made into a film. "Just as they find oil here," he quips, "I came to find someone to finance my movie."

When these two distinguished literary figures get together informally, with their vivacious wives, Vera and Madhu, the conversation is highly animated, brimming with words of wisdom, humorous anecdotes and the zest for life with which they approach each day.

"They come from very different backgrounds, but their goals and their souls are very similar," says Vera, Lustig's wife whom Kumar affectionately refers to as "bhabhi," sister-in-law.



Chris Ruggiers

OU visitors Vera Lustig, left, Shiv and Madhu Kumar and Arnost Lustig.

Kumar has published a drama, a novel, a collection of short stories, four books of poetry, and several books of literary criticism. In two years at OU, he has written two additional novels.

Lustig, credited with five films in addition to his novels, came to OU this fall from American University, Washington, D.C., where he served as associate professor of literature. A native of Prague, he left his home country after the 1968 Soviet invasion. In Czechoslovakia, half a million copies of Lustig's books have been published in more than 20 languages.

"My career came only with my marriage," Kumar explains, recalling his late entrance into creative writing. "That is a real compliment for Madhu. She made it possible. I have been guided by her instinct much more than by my professional colleagues. I respect her judgment."

"If we (Vera and Madhu) would work full time, we would make it, too — a career," Vera, an interior decorator, states with humor. "But without us and our understanding, they would not write one great sentence."

—CATHERINE BISHOP