

On the Town

Thread of life

Rousseau spins some of his best yarns to celebrate his 20th year as storyteller

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, (but) the sound of a story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths.

— Reynolds Price

By BILL STIEGER

Storyteller Richard Rousseau found his calling in 1991 when he attended a class on storytelling taught at the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis by master raconteur Spaulding Gray. Soon after, he got his first storytelling gig, appearing at the Coffeehouse Gallery in Minneapolis.

"I was fascinated by Gray's improvisational style of storytelling," said Rousseau, 68, a resident of St. Paul's Snelling-Hanline neighborhood. "Gray said a good story can come from any situation where you are made to feel uncomfortable. His technique was to have just a few notes in front of him and to wing the rest of the story. I was hooked from that day forward."

Rousseau's stories are mostly comedies taken from experience. "I got a lot of my material from living in North Dakota," he said. "I drove a cab in Fargo, and that provided me with a lot of material. I also managed a theater company up there, and you can just imagine that."

Rousseau was born in Connecticut, attended college at North Dakota State University and began working in theaters there. Acting was his passion at the time.

"There obviously wasn't a lot of work in North Dakota," he said, "so I moved to the Twin Cities and worked in some of the local theaters."

He also served a two-year stint as an English teacher in Illinois, worked for several years as a trainer for Rivertown Trading Company in St. Paul, and continues to exercise his acting skills as a member of the Science Museum of Minnesota's Science Live Acting Company, playing various characters from history. "I played Captain Edward Smith during the Titanic exhibition," he said. "That was my favorite role."

As a storyteller, Rousseau has appeared at coffeehouses, churches, schools, theaters and the Minnesota Fringe Festival. He helped found the Northstar Storytelling League and in 2007 received its Talking Stick Award.

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Richard's background as an actor is what makes him such a great storyteller, said Tom Cassidy, who works with Rousseau in a group called Cheap Theater, which performs regularly at the Black Forest Inn in Minneapolis. "It gives him a range that many storytellers just don't have."

On Thursday, January 5, Rousseau will mark 20 years as a storyteller by delivering a compilation of his best stories beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Anodyne Coffee House, 4301 Nicollet Ave. S. in Minneapolis. It is the first of four shows by Rousseau at the Anodyne. The others will begin at 7:30 p.m. on Thursdays, February 2, March 1 and April



The many mugs of storyteller Richard Rousseau. PHOTOS BY BRAD STRAUFFER

5. Admission is free, though donations will be accepted.

Cassidy is looking forward to Rousseau's appearances at the Anodyne. "It's like he's going back to his early days of storytelling," he said. "He's just going to get up on the stage like a guy off the street who wants your attention. It's risky, but that's how Richard likes it. He likes those edgy situations where a performer either fails or succeeds."

Sue Mielchenhausen, a retired Macalester-Groveland attorney, counts herself as among

Rousseau's biggest fans. "I first heard him at St. Mark's School (in Merriam Park) where our kids went to school," she said. "Richard has a marvelous speaking voice and the ability to draw people into his stories. I'm frankly in awe of his ability to capture an audience's attention."

Cassidy may have described Rousseau's talent best: "Richard, in his storytelling, makes you feel like you're sitting around the campfire, astonished, mesmerized and always ready for more."