

Phi Kappa Phi Western Region Artist Dr. James Ragan

"In Jim Ragan's poetry, there is a lyrical fusing of innocence and wisdom. It is this juxtaposition that makes his work so exhilarating." These were the words used by Chicago's Pulitzer Prize-winning radio commentator Studs Terkel to describe Phi Kappa Phi's Western Region Artist for the 1998-2001 triennium, Dr. James Ragan.

Ragan has been honored in the United States and abroad as an ambassador of poetry. He has read his work for four heads of state, including, in 1989, Russia's then-Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev as part of the First International Poetry Festival. Ragan was one of only three American poets invited to present his work at the Festival; the other two were Bob Dylan and Robert Bly.

Ragan has directed the University of Southern California's Graduate Professional Writing Program for the past 17 years. He earned his B.A. at Saint Vincent College (1966) and his M.A. (1967) and Ph.D. degrees (1977) in English from Ohio University. In 1990, he also was granted an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from St. Vincent College. From 1993 to the present, Ragan has served each summer as Poet-in-Residence at Charles University in Prague, where, in 1994, he performed for the International PEN Congress along with playwright Arthur Miller.

Three of Ragan's books of poetry have received international acclaim. His first, *In the Talking Hours*, resulted in immediate inter-national recognition. Poems from *In the Talking Hours* have been awarded the Emerson Poetry Prize, an NEA grant, two Borestone Mountain Poetry Nominations, and the Swan Foundation Humanitarian Award.

His second book, *Womb-Weary*, addresses the need to remove oneself from the secure, or metaphorically, the "womb." Poems in this second book received two Pushcart Prize nominations, a Pulitzer Prize nomination, and a Jertrude Claytor Award from the Poetry Society of America. *Womb-Weary* was also a finalist for the Walt Whitman Center Book Award and the PEN Center West Poetry Prize.

His third collection of poetry, *The Hunger Wall*, has been praised by Marvin Bell as celebrating "the lush lyricism of a hungry eye and an open heart." In Ragan's poems, he compares America to Prague and the abyss he sees between the rich and the poor in both.

In his newest collection of poems, *Lusions*, Ragan delves into "the point where the past and the present meet and the impact they have on a fragmented culture." He explores societal climates of allusion, delusion, illusion, collusion, exclusion, occlusion, and seclusion—hence, the "lusions" title. In reference to this recent work, *Publisher's Weekly* states that Ragan "continues his song through the centuries in language that echoes Rilke."

Growing up as one of 13 children in a Czechoslovakian family where English was the second language, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, native stated that "In my home, there was

always a sense of immersion in another language and culture. So already, I had a sense of the international." Thus Ragan's roots contributed greatly to his ability to paint deftly a global canvas of themes that cross cultural boundaries. To date, his work has been translated into 12 languages in Europe and Asia.

Ragan has also written for stage and film. Two of his plays, *Saints* and *Commedia*, have been produced here in the United States and in the Soviet Union. Many of

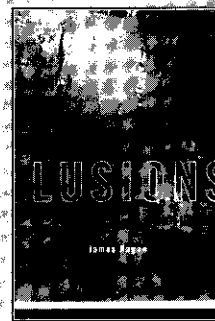
Ragan's screenplays, which he composed while a screenwriter at Paramount Pictures, have been optioned or produced. His most recent film is *Last Story of the Century* (1999) and is based on the siege of Sarajevo.

In addition to his international acclaim as poet, playwright, screenwriter, and educator, many of Ragan's students and colleagues will tell you that he's downright "cool." "So 'cool'" in fact, that James Ragan was named to *Buzz Magazine's* 1997 list of the "100 Coolest People of Los Angeles."

In October of 2000, Dr. Ragan will perform his poetry at New York's Carnegie Hall.



James Ragan was presented a framed certificate by Paul J. Ferlazzo, Phi Kappa Phi Western Region Vice President, to commemorate his being named Phi Kappa Phi Western Region Artist.



***Lusions*, James Ragan's newest collection of poems, are "lyrical and witty poems about change and cultural evolution."**



During the Western Region Mid-Triennial Conference, James Ragan spent time with the delegates and even signed copies of his latest book, *Lusions*.