

## Spotlight/**Buffalo Humanities Festival**

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

When asked about the Buffalo Humanities Festival, Erick Seeman, professor of history at the University at Buffalo, director of UB's Humanities Institute, and noted historian of the Americas, is quick to stress that it is a festival, not a conference. The other element of the festival he talks about most is keynote speaker Gary Shteyngart, a critically acclaimed writer whom Seeman greatly admires.

The Buffalo Humanities Festival (BHF) will revolve around the thorny issue of migration, a controversial subject of unceasing interest in the news that the BHF attempts to approach in a novel way. "As humanists, we care about the human element behind the headlines, and this helps us to get beyond the hyperbole," says Libby Otto, executive director of the Humanities Institute.

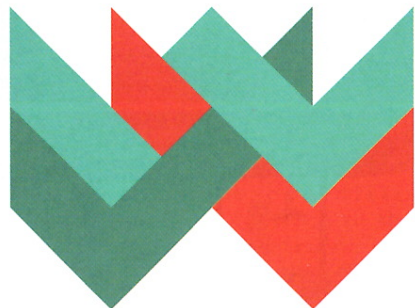
Seeman has long envied the grandeur of the Chicago Humanities Festival, never imagining that he would someday create a similar event in Buffalo. But recently, while at the annual conference of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, Seeman was inspired by another center director who had just started a humanities festival in Iowa. The festival had yielded impressive results, and Seeman saw the opportunity to pitch the idea to Otto.

"If Iowa City and Louisville can do it, then Buffalo can do it, too," says Seeman. After all, Buffalo has a strong museum and theater scene, and boasts

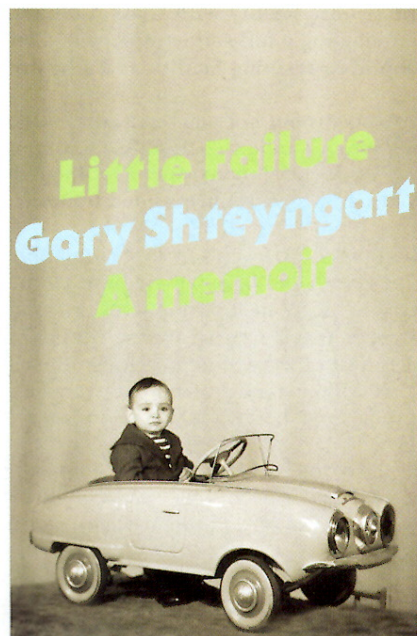
more than fifty art galleries and over twenty professional theater companies. "When Erik proposed it, I was so convinced that it was right that I almost wondered why we didn't already have a humanities festival," agrees Otto.

Over the years, Buffalo has developed

## BUFFALO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL



Gary Shteyngart





as an academic city, with SUNY institutions providing thriving programs to more than 54,000 students in the area. The city also enjoys a large educated and engaged citizenry. Yet, as Otto notes, the two groups—the academic institutions and the broader public—do not have enough opportunities to interface. The goal of the Buffalo Humanities Festival is to provide such a platform. “This festival is not simply a matter of being lectured at,” says Otto. “It is built around members of the public; their questions and ideas are as central to the event as those of the presenters.”

And who would better brew up a lively conversation storm than Gary Shteyngart? Shteyngart spent seven years of his childhood in what is now St. Petersburg, Russia, before emigrating to the United States in 1979. In his recently released memoir, *Little Failure*, he writes much about his family and their soviet culture. His ebullient satirical style has been praised numerous times, and his fiction and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and other publications. “Once we started thinking about Shteyngart in relation to this theme, everything fell into place,” says Otto.

Seeman says that Shteyngart, who is now in his forties, can appeal to people in their twenties and thirties, as well as the older demographic who often attend humanities events. The festival will begin with a talk and a book signing by the celebrated satirist in the Albright-Knox auditorium on September 26.

On September 27, a full slate of lectures, conversations, and roundtables, followed by a series of video screenings, are simultaneously scheduled to stimulate cogent discussion on the topics of immigration and migration—examining the topic in relation to everything from history to art to music. Featured speakers include Jason Young of UB’s History Department, who will talk about the Middle Passage of enslaved people; Mary Jane Masiulionis of Buffalo State, who addresses Post World War II Polish migration to the US; and photographer Law Eh Soe, who will discuss his experiences as a political refugee from Burma and recent immigrant to Buffalo.

Between slides and presentations, attendees will be able to indulge in gastronomic delights at the West Side Bazaar. The Bazaar, which fosters small businesses operated by immigrants, will offer food from Burma, Ethiopia, Japan, North Africa, and Thailand. Visitors can enjoy their treats at a specially created dining tent, where a hundred tables and chairs will be set up, or inside the

Burchfield Penney Art Center.

“I just want people to know that humanities can be fun, interesting and accessible,” says Seeman.

On the day of the event, fifty Buffalo State students will volunteer—you’ll be able to spot their gold t-shirts. Partners include Buffalo State College, Canisius College, Niagara University, SUNY Fredonia, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Burchfield Penney Art Center. Day-passes are \$8 for students and \$10 for nonstudents, and include a box lunch.

As for next year, Seeman already has

a keynote speaker in mind: Harvard University history professor and staff writer of the *New Yorker*, Jill Lapore.

The Buffalo Humanities festival takes place September 26–27. Visit [buffalohumanities.org](http://buffalohumanities.org) for more information.

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