









*Gracies Dinnertime Theatre* presents...

# The Big Red Book



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A Member of Hell's Kitchen  
472 French Rd, Rochester, New York 14618

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RIT by Kelly Gunter  
Science and Space by Sean Hammond  
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## The Big Red Bite

### Funded Speech

### (or: Speaking Offensively by Agreement)

by Peter W. Ferran

Why would some RIT students want to publish a journal of satirical humor and opinion? It could be because they see all around them a pathological complacency about “things as they are,” an uncritical acceptance of a world obviously in need of repair. Possibly they believe that this world remains damaged because people are ignorant, foolish, and malevolent, and therefore that human stupidity in all its manifestations should be exposed to ridicule. Probably they think of themselves as providing a salutary service to society.

If this is the case with the student publishers and writers of *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre* and the other occasional publications under the name of “Hell’s Kitchen,” they have been doing the right thing. The spiritual life of RIT’s campus has been quickened by the critical chastenings and satirical provocations that have steamed aggressively off GDT’s pages for the past five years. As proof of the magazine’s healthful effect, one RIT community group after another has complained about its irreverent, impolite, impudent, immodest, indiscriminately broad thrusts. Several of these groups (a coalition?) have exercised their vocal entitlement strenuously enough to gain the ears of the highest Institute officers, baldly demanding of both the President and Provost that RIT cut off GDT’s funding because its published speech both offends them and tarnishes the school’s image. If this insupportable demand is met, the RIT community will be deprived of the mocking mirror it so fundamentally requires. We will lose the only campus publication that uncompromisingly reflects our locally world-damaging combination of ignorance, foolishness, and malevolence. What could replace it? The new Freshman Seminar? The First-in-Class Initiative? The Fieldhouse?

*Gracies Dinnertime Theatre* has been bucking an ancient difficulty. Most people do not want to hear the truth about their world’s imperfections. They shout: “Don’t you dare say what I don’t want to hear!” And when they read themselves indicted for the world’s damage (on account of their stupidity), they become indignant, outraged: “You have offended me! I’ll report you to the authorities!” Here we recognize that the definitive social crime in our Millennial Era is offensiveness. No longer is it necessary to demonstrate that real injury has been done: the offended parties need only declare that they feel offended. Then, as often as not, the authorities will happily dispatch their version of brown-shirts to carry out the contemporary equivalent of smashing up the print shop. Thus, it is comfortably alleged, is the wider community served.

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“People are bloody ignorant apes.” So says Estragon, the supposedly “simple” character in *Waiting for Godot*. He is reacting specifically to his partner Vladimir’s averral that “people” believe what is written in the New Testament. (“It’s the only version they know,” he explains.) Indeed, people *are* bloody ignorant to believe unquestioningly in things which they know in one version alone, usually one that has been current for a long time. But people invest belief in far more idiotic matters than the verifiability of the Gospels. For example, many people (and not only students) believe that an educational institution which grants money to a student publication has the right to stop granting that money if the published matter displeases the institution. Here the commanding “principle” (if we can call it that) is that authority and power are validated by *ownership*: “It’s my money, so I have the absolute right to do what I like with it.” It doesn’t occur to these believers that a superior principle might govern the money-granting relationship between a university and a group of its students who create a publication. In fact, in such a relationship there is an implicit compact concerning the educational pur-

pose of the publishing activity. If there arises a displeasure about the published matter, it is only reasonable to investigate how the terms of this compact may have been violated. Simply to declare displeasure and then invoke ownership as a sufficient ground for withdrawing funding, without inquiring into the nature of the publishing activity, is irrational. To persist in this mode of thinking is stupid. (A perfect object for satire!)

“Satire which the Censor understands is rightly prohibited.” This wry epigram by the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus was inspired by the cultural situation in Central Europe at the turn of the last century, in which it was an accepted fact that freedom of speech was limited by governmental power; the existence of a Censor was unquestioned. Under such circumstances as these, a granting agency would approve funding for a journal of satirical opinion only under the condition that no printed item in it should be offensive enough to displease the Kaiser, upon pain of having the funding rescinded. We can see how this would be a violation, *in advance*, of the implied agreement about what the publication was for. It would be *a priori* censorship, an anticipatory abridgement of free speech—“You can have our money to publish your journal, but you can only publish certain things in it.” The writers who wanted to publish satire would then have the choice of either refusing this grant, knowing in advance that their speech would not be free, or of devising ways to work around the restrictiveness. Their best way would be to write so subtly that the Censor could not understand the satire.

But these are presumably not the conditions prevailing today. With specific respect to RIT’s funding of *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre*, there is no assumption of censorship. RIT’s granting agency, the Creative Arts Program, is not a censor. It is not even an editorial monitor: it implicitly agrees *not* to exert influence of any kind upon the content of the publication. The agreement, therefore, *excludes* the kind of discretionary right assumed by the ignorant to belong to the owner of the money, RIT. In fact, RIT’s approving (through its agent, Creative Arts) a grant to GDT erects a particular agreement between these parties that is based on the nature of the creative artistic activity being funded, an activity *approved as educationally valuable*—namely, publishing satirical opinion. Any dispute about the product issuing from this funded, approved activity can be adjudicated only in the operative terms of the agreement.

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“A man must live in his own times, but he can try to make the times worth living in.” The people who conceived *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre* and have composed it for these five years were clearly motivated by such a thought as this, articulated by one of modernity’s greatest champions of liberal thought, Henrik Ibsen. The present collection of writings from GDT’s life—short though it may turn out to be—testifies to a promise of better intellectual times at RIT. For it to be autocratically stifled in its attempt to improve the campus atmosphere would not augur well. Upholders of free creative expression need to look out for such ominous signs, and to be ready to oppose the darker acts they signify. We don’t want to find ourselves in the same extreme disposition as Bertolt Brecht was in 1938, when he wrote:

*In the dark times  
Will there also be singing?  
Yes, there will also be singing  
About the dark times.*

