

Joe Sherman

“Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men Walk under his huge legs...”
William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene II

Michael Rakusin Pays Tribute

Entering my sixty-seventh year with a use-by date on the approach, I often think now about the nature of achievement: what was the purpose of my life, what constitutes a life well lived? Is ‘success’ to be counted in money, in academic papers, in high office, in new inventions, in a happy family, in personal contentment? I have no answers, but it seems to me, one measure surely must be the impact one has had on the lives of others.

Using that yardstick, there jumps forth as a true success, one man out of the many people who taught me at school (whose names I can no longer remember) and the thousands in the rest of my life with whom I have brushed acquaintance: Joseph Sherman.

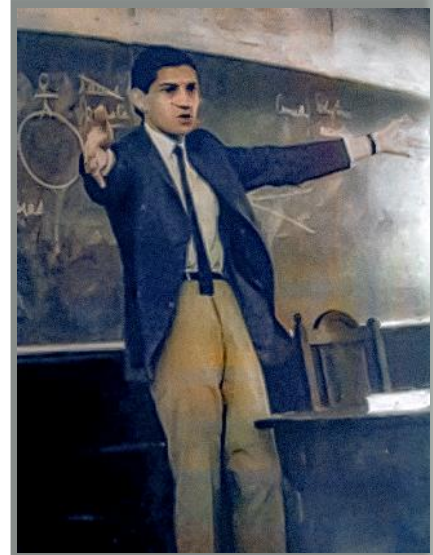
My first meeting with Joe as my English teacher in Form 1 did little to portend his true pedagogic genius. We were then a gaggle of 13- and 14-year-old boys in search of direction. Most of it came from sport-loving, ‘manly’ teachers (even the female teachers) steeped in the rigid educational ethos of Queen and Country. Into our first English class blew a tornado, a tallish, middle-aged man with high-set cheekbones, a long straight nose and a very angular jaw-line, dressed as befitting the Prince Regent: tight, tailored trousers, waistcoat, bowtie and impeccable jacket, complete with brightly-coloured pocket handkerchief.

And the voice!! Strong, commanding, regular South African accent overlaid with LTCL. A voice which could not be ignored.

Now, looking back, it is apparent that that middle-aged man was himself only 22-years-old at the time. KES must have been his first teaching post after university.

In an article published in Midstream magazine, Vol 55, No 3 of 2009, after Joe’s passing, Todd Pitok observed “Chronological age was the wrong measure for Joseph anyway. It just wasn’t a good gauge of his vitality. He was, I suspect, born old, and he kept it up over a lifetime. As long as I knew him, and apparently long before that, he had back and hearing problems. I never asked him why. I never thought to because they were, to me, just part of who he was. He walked slowly and his hearing aid was visible. You couldn’t talk to him on the phone because the device he needed never seemed to work. He also cultivated a certain look: bowties, scarves, cravats and vests, plus a full beard that brought to mind an era when photographers still shot in sepia.”

Not for Joe the constraints of a TED syllabus. That served merely as a jumping-off point for an incursion into a whole new world for most of us, a world of vast literary knowledge (English, French, German, Russian), phonetics, history, art history, theatre and popular culture. A world of very strong opinions, dislike of the plebeian, disdain for the popular. But above all, his classroom was an environment in which text came alive, in which language had resonance; in short, he actually made learning fun!





I was fortunate enough to be taught English by Joe again in Form 4 and Matric. I think it's no overstatement to say that he was very instrumental in shaping my life. I am sure it was not chance that led me to the English Department at Wits after school and to an involvement with language, in one form or another, throughout my subsequent career. That I was inspired by him is probably right: I was a non-sportsman, far more taken with debating and drama in which pursuits he was very active.

But what utterly amazes me is the impact he had on the memories and affections of so many of my Matric cohort – not just the nerdy types and the purple capes, but the true rugger-buggers, people who pursued careers miles from language or literature. In the WhatsApp chat amongst us in the lead-up to the 50th Reunion, Joe Sherman is clearly the most remembered, and almost all that memory is positive. And we were but one slice of the many, many students he taught at various stages in his 40-year teaching career.

Peter Janks commented, "I remember the KES we started at being a small, intense group dominated by sporting heroes, with academia coming a fairly distant second. In this environment, courageous (in retrospect) almost to the point of insanity was the best teacher there that I can recall, the late Joe Sherman, who it seemed rowed upstream against overwhelming currents pretty much on a daily, monthly and yearly basis".

Joe's dicta and sayings are still so vividly remembered. When two or more of our cohort meet up, it's invariable that some of them will enter the conversation, even now, fifty years later.

Peter Janks recalled: "I took to recording in writing some of Joe's verbal pearls, aimed at us pupils, some of whom sadly are no longer with us –

"I am cursed in 5C with fools and animals." "Cory, you are a walking vacuum!"

"Craig, immature, gangling youth!"

"There is always something that sours up your day, and that something is Stein."

"Duchen, fat person – be silent!"

"Klerck keeps jumping out of his cage!"

"Don't shout at me you savage – this is not the University of the Witwatersrand!"

"You are eavesdroppers on my personal communion with Hamlet." (when he was interrupted) (Someone comes in whistling) "This is not a buffet lunch!"

"Has anyone got a sweet of a sucking nature?"

"Cory – don't you dare sleep while I'm doing Hamlet!"

"Try to read it with more life – this is not the Stock Exchange report!" "Stop barking, Craig!"

"You're like a village idiot who's lost his village."

“Haynes – this is not the Lonely-Hearts Club!” “Just lapse back into your usual coma, you fool!”

“In my all-conquering perspicacity of 5C.”

“I was so impressed by my articles in *The Star*.”

“Sit down Walker, you provincial creature from Vereeniging!” “If I was a bastard, this would not have happened.”

“I did not invite a bazaar!”

“I refuse to be mobbed! I am not Jimi Hendrix!” “You will never know how much I hate you.”

“The worst insult you can give a person today is to call him a Wits student!” “Woe to you! Hypocrites! Philistines! Out!”

“Sink back into your philistine stupor, man!”

“Don’t clap your hands now, Craig. Do that at the end of the year when there will be much weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth!”

(Sir, where are your sideburns?) “For those who distress themselves unduly over my appearance, they will be started again on Sunday.”

“You people do not know how witty I am.”

(And, after Mark Hofman – I think – revealed to Joe that I was keeping a list of his sayings) “Janks’ list is not complete – I have yet an infinite variety!”

David Glen adds these Joe jewels:

“Engineers eat, drink and fornicate.” This was said on learning that my brother who was taught by Joe was studying civil engineering.

“Sitting with this committee is akin to waiting at Lourdes for divine revelation.”

“Gertrude was the whore of Babylon.” This was said when discussing the Nicol Williamson film of *Hamlet*.



“Evelyn Leveson, pathetic old bag!” Ms Leveson was the Sunday Express critic who suggested that Hamlet arm himself with a flick knife in Joe’s production of *Hamlet*.

“You will look back on these days and say ‘Ah, there was a wise man.’” Joe was talking about his contribution to our development. This prediction proved to be prescient.

To the above, I would add my personal favourites, on the Sunday Times (the paper for the people), “Ah yes, but what do the people use paper for?”

“Either Shakespeare knew what he was doing, or he didn’t.” “Popular equals vulgar.”

KES AND TELL

Joe was very active in all of the non-sporting aspects of school life. He coached the debating team and was very involved with the Dramatic Society (as much as Hugh Wilson would let him). His performance in Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* as Andrew Crocker-Harris was memorable and discussed for years after. He had a love of Chekhov and produced many Chekhov plays at Wits.

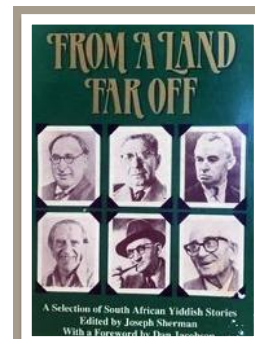
Some years after school, I encountered Joe again when, thanks to my role at Standard Bank, he became a fellow adjudicator of the RAPS High School Drama competition (with Kate Turkington). We sat through three one-act plays for six nights a week continuously for 30 nights!! On stage, giving his judgement, he was professional, insightful, encouraging and very creative. Off stage, in the judge's room, he kept Kate and me doubled-over with laughter, mimicking the more outrageous and appalling aspects of the productions we had seen.

As a result of this contact, he persuaded me to take part in one of his Chekhov productions at Wits; I can't remember now if it was *Uncle Vanya* or *The Three Sisters*. Here I saw a new side of Joe: highly focused with a clear perception of what he was trying to achieve, driven to demand the best we actors could give and completely uncompromising.

He left KES and became a lecturer in the English Department at Wits for many years. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, there was a whole dimension of Joe to which we had not been exposed and knew nothing about. In its March 2009 edition, the *Forward* newspaper recorded "*he came from a Yiddish-speaking family (his father and uncle were both Yiddish writers), and he was passionate about Yiddish literature – particularly from his native South Africa.*"

"He really in a way saved South African Yiddish writing," said Zilla Goodman, Professor of Hebrew language and literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "He actually brought it to the fore and made sure that it's been put in archives, made sure that it was translated and published."

He translated and compiled an anthology of twenty-seven stories tracing the growth of Yiddish literature in SA entitled *From A Land Far Off*. The stories provide a vivid picture of early Jewish life in South Africa, 'greenhorns' coming to terms with their adopted land while still harking back, usually with lively nostalgia, to the Old Home. Joe completed his PhD on the novels of Nobel prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer.



In his later years, Joe was appointed Professor of Yiddish in the department of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford in England. It was here that he seemed to bloom into what he was always destined to be. I visited him for many years on my annual trips to the London Book Fair. He and his wife Karen lived in a beautiful English cottage, a ten-minute walk from his office at the University. He had no car, no mobile phone, no computer and still wrote in lavish calligraphic script with a fountain pen. He had become more substantial in girth, but the sartorial splendour remained as it had been. His skills as a raconteur had, if anything, grown with his physical size: an erudite mixture of village gossip, observations of the world, strong opinions about almost everything, all delivered with a nonpareil turn of phrase. I was devastated to hear that shortly after my last visit to Oxford he had died of complications from pancreatitis at the age of 65.

Neville Hoad, one of his Wits students, recalled "He had a flair for the dramatic. He had an abrasive, assertive sense of humour that he wasn't scared to use in the classroom. He always used to say he could've been a preacher, a teacher or an actor. In the end, he was a scholar."

For me Joe Sherman was all of those as well as a mentor, influencer and a shining example of what a life of achievement does, in fact, represent.

Michael Rakusin

Derek Hewitt Pays Tribute

“Alas, poor Joe ... I knew him...a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.... Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?”



Joe may have abhorred the above paraphrase, but it's apt. When I think of Joe Sherman, I feel a sense of loss that I didn't know him in the time after KES, and that he passed on so relatively young, at about the age we are now. His loss conjures for me an image of his indelible Hamlet lessons. I can't help picturing him, eyes closed, delivering the Yorick soliloquy in a whisper, and transfixing our attention.

While we affected not to listen, and to fool around in class, Joe Sherman found ways to break through to all of us, imparting lessons that can never be forgotten. He was a gifted actor, and each lesson was in some respects a performance.

Honestly, when I think of all my university professors and other teachers, I just can't recall much about them. The same cannot be said of Joe. He was a Master in every sense of the word. It was like watching Pavarotti, or Pele, or those other few immortals that are at the top of their game. Through the sheer power of passion, he was able to drag us unwilling initiates into sharing his love for the language.

Amazingly enough, without having to threaten or cane us, Joe was able to command our attention, seemingly without effort. In fact, watching Joe try to exercise authority was a hilarious experience, and he himself seemed to participate in the joke. The story of how Joe attempted to cane someone, broke the cane on the desk and never attempted it again is told elsewhere in this book.

What I remember fondly is Joe's slamming down a pile of books to quiet an unruly class, yelling "Silence!" at the top of his voice. Silence would indeed be achieved for a few seconds, followed by titters as Joe completely spoiled the effect by glancing around the room as though amazed at his own daring.



Joe's ultimate teaching trick – call it a power – was that he made it clear he was going to enter his magic world, often with eyes closed, of say, Shakespeare, with or without us. We were invited to join him, and it was our loss if we didn't come along for the ride. I mean, how can you not love a guy who's chewing and savouring the language in your presence as though he's tasting a fine wine recommended by Michael Fridjhon? Indeed, how could you avoid taking a taste yourself?

He had a way of putting concise nuggets of wisdom into unforgettable little performances. For instance, he would say: "When we use alliteration, let us use it sparingly, and for a purpose, the way Shakespeare would. Consider, for example, the Prologue to Henry V. Listen to the language; the alliteration paints a picture that



Shakespeare intended you to see in your mind's eye." Then he would slip into character to deliver the lines with infinite expression, plus sublime timing and drawn-out diction:

"Think when we talk of horses, that you see them.

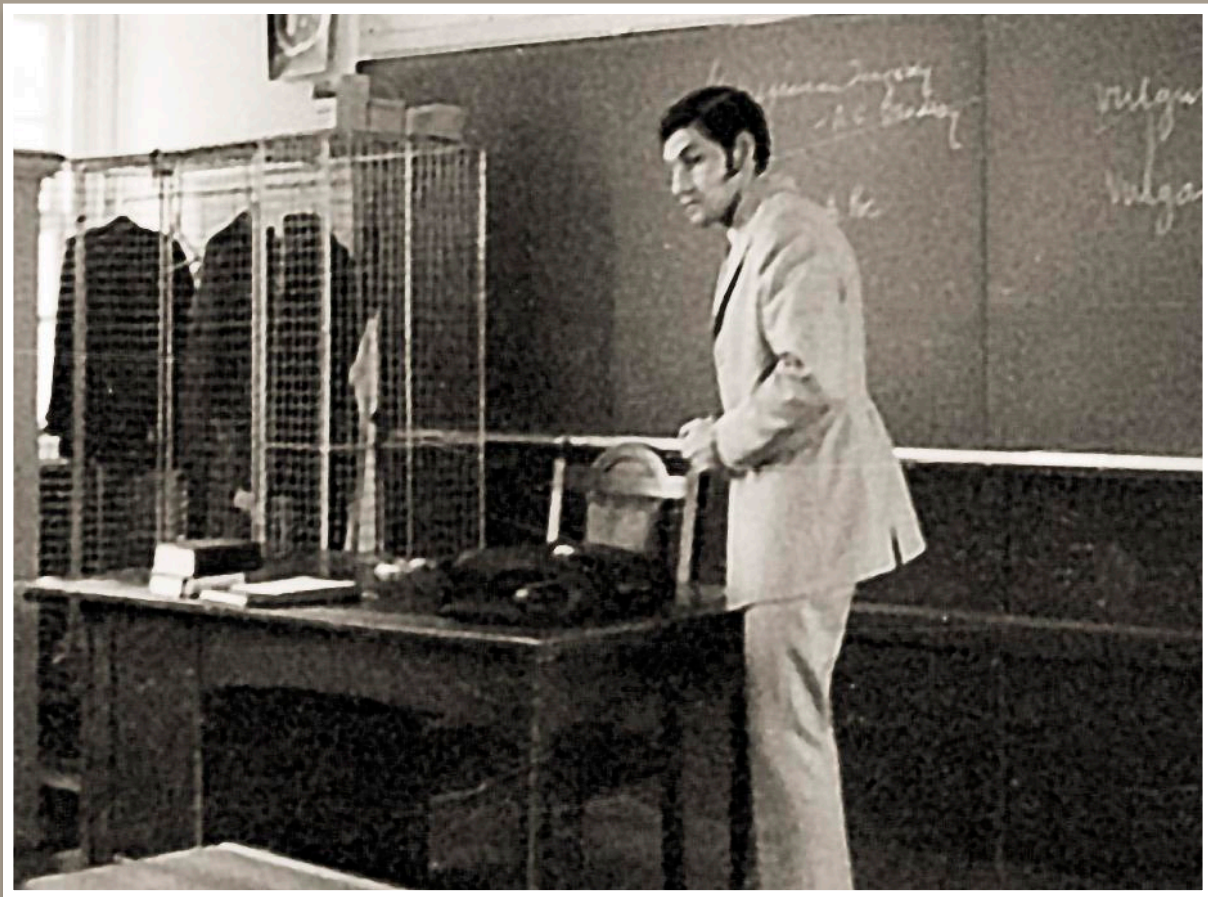
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth".

This would be followed by a reverent quiet, while our imaginations drank in the scene and we absorbed a lifelong lesson. Got it, Joe. Paint a picture with your words.

Other lessons were imprinted in different ways. I played in a rock group, and was fully embracing the reactionary language of our hippie days. We carried book bags on our backs, called rucksacks, and I had painted on mine in psychedelic colours, the immortal saying which I had pinched from an MC5 song: "Kick Out The Jams, Brothers and Sisters!"

One day, I plunked down my bag on a front desk, and Joe approached, examined the slogan, and said: "But what does it MEAN?? Every word you use should have MEANING."

Ok, Joe. Meaning matters. Lesson learned.



Joe often called us Philistines, and in many ways we were. Yet he inspired many of us to sneak out and pay good money to see movies no-one else could have persuaded us to see. In 1968, we were enthralled by, and lusted after, Olivia Hussey in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1969, we earnestly debated among ourselves whether Nicol Williamson had bastardized the role of Hamlet in the movie.

Joe was about 26 years old when he taught us in 1970. Here was a man who had committed the entire Shakespearean canon to memory, and much else besides. He was a serious scholar, but that didn't stop him exercising a wicked, rapier wit. I once asked him: "Sir, what do you think of the theory that Francis Bacon wrote the plays, not Shakespeare?" Joe replied with a sardonic grin: "That is so much piffle. The plays were written by Shakespeare" – dramatic pause while he sets up the joke with a sly glance around the class – "...or someone else of the same name!" I often felt that Joe enjoyed the riposte with the quick, young minds in the classroom much more than talking to the dullards in the staff room.

He also quietly rejected much of the bureaucratic nonsense teachers were required to go through, and took some flak for it, while making amusing asides in class about it. He was determined that we should receive an education at his hands, rather than just grades. One of the contemptuous comments Joe would deliver to striving students complaining about his lackadaisical method of marking papers was: "You are always grubbing for marks!"

To be insulted by Joe was a compliment in itself. Mike Rakusin and Peter Janks have recorded some of his delightful put-downs elsewhere. Suffice it to say, if Joe thought you were worthy of an insult, it meant you had entered the orbit of his attention, and that was worth something.

I personally escaped Joe's notice for a long time, being a silent onlooker for much of the time. Then, instead of my usual slapdash, minimalist approach to all schoolwork, I decided to give one essay some thought. Walking home, I had seen a black man being roughly handled and arrested by police because he was not carrying his passbook (which was required of all blacks in white neighbourhoods). I was previously fairly oblivious to the injustices of the apartheid society in which I lived, and this incident led to a mild awakening of social conscience, so I wrote an essay about it that I called *Autumn Blues in the City*.

Joe surprised me when I came into class by saying: "Aha, Hewitt! Here enters someone who appears to have found his voice." He read my essay aloud, and it came to life with the power of his delivery. He gave me an A and looked at me slightly differently after that.

Of such small recognitions are careers made. On finishing law school, I turned away from a job I had accepted, doing articles for a law firm, and instead took a lowly job as a beginner advertising copywriter for R100 a month. Although Joe would have completely ridiculed my choice, it was his inspiration that led me to seek a living from my pen. It worked out fine.

It's no surprise that a teacher of his genius should make the meteoric leap from high school teacher in Johannesburg to full chair at Oxford University. As he was a world expert in Yiddish Literature, I would have relished having his input on a recent interesting exchange with classmate Martin Lindenberg on the differences between South African and American Yiddish.

With the hindsight of 50 years, it's hard not to regret showing more appreciation of Joe, for I never came across his like again. As human as the rest of us, and needing the encouragement of a response from his audience, Joe sometimes despairingly complained that he was casting pearls before swine.

Losing patience over inattention, he would sometimes end the lesson and have us get the hell out of his classroom. But he did it in inimitable Joe style, saying:

"I desire you to heed the words of Lady Macbeth: 'Stand not upon the order of thy going, but go at once!'"

We would shuffle our feet as though moving quickly for the door, but in fact moving agonizingly slowly. Joe would rise up on his platform and yell, still quoting Macbeth: “Avaunt and quit my sight!”

He quit our sight too soon. But the swine are still using his pearls.

Derek Hewitt



More Recollections of Joe Sherman



Mr. Sherman was a young man, probably no more than five or so years older than we were when he began to teach us. Thin, sharp features, a long Jewish nose, a little bent over and always in a suit, not blazer and tie like some of the other male teachers.

Joe was quite dramatic in his mannerisms and probably exaggerated them for effect. He was full of witticisms of all kinds – mostly sharp, insightful and sometimes thrown out for both effect and amusement. Such as when Sanders, a short and plucky classmate with blond hair, would come into class, take off his jacket (without asking permission) and throw open the large sash window next to his own desk. Joe would then say in a crisp and commanding voice: “Sanders, close that window, haven’t I told you fresh air gives you cancer?” to the great amusement of the class. Especially since Joe was a smoker of cigarettes. How typical of the man.

But boy, could he teach English – poetry, literature, all types, eras, styles and with brilliant insights and guidance. Also, so often really amusing. We certainly learnt a fortune in his classroom! Not only appreciation and criticism: almost everyone’s writing improved. Joe was surely wasted on us ‘Philistines’ as he would call us, when a crass or foolish comment was made by a class member. Many of my contemporaries from that time have pointed out that he really was wasted on us.

Martin Lindenberg

I bumped into Joe on the steps of the Great Hall at Wits - he seemed surprised to see me, and said as only he could, with clipped, precise speech...

“What are you doing here? You were from the year of the black plague – and this is a place of learning!”

Bless him...

Willy Reitz

No question Joe Sherman was brilliant and a class act never to be replaced or forgotten. A character of note. He gave us an appreciation of the English language which was unimaginable!

Arthur (Arfir) Walker put his jacket on inside out and Joe said, “Arfir, what are you doing with that jacket?” to which Arfir replied “Sir, there is no rule in the school that says you can’t wear your jacket inside out.” ... Joe just went on with the class!

Trevor used to cough, a ‘he hehehe’, mainly behind the cupboard in Joe’s class. “Always a cough Cross T!”

Mark Adam Stein

When Joe Sherman of blessed memory handed back marked test papers to the class, someone who received a mark of 7/25 said “Sir, you haven’t marked half my test.” “Bring it here you miserable, immature, gangling youth,” Joe retorted and then spent a minute slashing red ink lines through the unmarked pages..... “No change,” he said whilst handing it back.....

Lewis Duchon

To this day, I still test all my reports for SIFT, Sense, Intention, Feeling and Tone.

John Gardner

Joe was the only teacher who did anything for me at KES, I never had Hugh Wilson (too much of an imbecile for the A-class). Joe was having a laugh of his own at us Philistines, and I liked that about him.

In the early years he also tried to flap and failed at it. We were about to read Thomas Beckett and I put up my hand and said "Sir, can I read Tommy?" (laughs) Joe: "Haynes – you imbecile!"

Joe was an awesome, unconventional teacher. His real interesting self always shone through and it was that which became the master. All the boys learnt something. RIP much too early.

Tim Haynes

Joe passed away a few years ago. He did the Valediction speech at my son's Matric year end in 2000. Boys were blown away. He was spell-binding. I went and thanked him for the effort and manner in which he taught us. He actually had tears in his eyes. Very moved.

Whenever I saw Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society, I thought of Joe.

Des Holdcroft



KES AND TELL

Of all our teachers Joe Sherman was a personal favourite of mine and many other boys. Joe looked like a typical Oxford Don, stooped, black hair slicked down to his scalp, a handkerchief up his sleeve and a gentle sardonic smile on his face. He walked as though he was looking for lost coins and with a rapid broken step, generally with his black robes flapping behind him. I loved his classes, again never a dull moment – either from Joe or our interactions with him. A great sense of humour and, of course, wonderful wordplay and puns. His put-downs were legendary. “Duchen, what is your view of Hamlet’s soliloquy?”, followed by “Crap, sit!” Our class was known as the Black Plague year, probably for good reason. However, I cannot remember a single time we stepped over the respect line with Joe. With every other teacher, yes, but not Joe. It seemed as if we were responding to his respect and adult treatment of us. My theory anyway and I like it! Joe taught me to love reading and the beauty of English – RIP Joe.

Trevor Minnie



Joe Sherman - a breath of fresh air.



In Joe's class, he could not hear high pitched sounds. So we used to hiss at arbitrary times, which was a great distraction from Shakespeare.

Doug Klerck

This was the "Lockjaw" saga with Joe. After Robin Hancock started it, all those who were assigned to read parts from Shakespeare plays followed suit. Every third word was replaced by the word "Lockjaw"! Joe went into a trance when we did Shakespeare and he never noticed.

Laurie Drake

Joe knew the plays by heart and didn't realize what we were saying when we replaced Shakespeare's words with our own for our amusement. I don't think he ever caught on. Unfortunately it didn't get me out of reading Ophelia.

Robin Hancock

Trevor Cross used to switch his spectacles with Joe Sherman as he turned his back on the class. Joe would turn around, put on his glasses, and find that he couldn't see.

Willy Reitz

Graham Sanders sat in the front desk of the row of desks closest to the windows in Joe Sherman's English classroom upstairs overlooking the quad. There was nothing unusual about this arrangement except that Sanders had been placed in the front desk so that Joe could keep an eye on him, being quite a naughty fellow. Sanders's desk was quite well placed under a window. We were all seated, waiting expectantly for our next instalment of Hamlet. Joe would walk into class, tell us to open our text books at page 57, and immediately rattle off the text verbatim and dramatically light up a cigarette. At this point Sanders would start coughing badly, stand up and open the window above his desk. Joe would walk over to the window and close it and continue puffing on his cigarette in quite flamboyant style. A while would pass and Sanders would start coughing violently as though he were choking, and would stand up and open the window again. Joe would walk over and close the window, now starting to get a little irritated by Sanders. This went on for a while until Joe got extremely irritated and burst out in his most theatrical arm waving manner, his well documented dictum about fresh air causing cancer. This utterance broke the tension that had been building in the class and brought a screaming spurt of laughter from the rest of us. I'm not sure who won the day on whether the window should be kept open or closed but do remember that Joe never gave up his habit of puffing away in class.

Ralph Jacobson

