



Ira Glass



Mary Fons

To have loved and lost

Poetry program celebrates the downside of romance

'NO LOVE FOR LOVE: THE POETRY CENTER OF CHICAGO'S ANTI-VALENTINE'S DAY SHOW'

Apollo Theater, 2540 N. Lincoln Ave. 8 p.m. Monday, Feb. 12. \$20-\$50. (773) 935-6100 or (312) 559-1212. www.ticketmaster.com.

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Love, we've been told, is a many-splendored thing. Yet it's also come in for its share of bad-mouthing over the centuries, and Lisa Buscami, executive director of the Poetry Center of Chicago, is tired of hearts, flowers and the throbbing of greeting cards. "We want," she says, "to hear from the other end of the love spectrum."

So naturally she turned to poets, those universally acknowledged experts on matters of the heart, to speak of the dark side of love.

In "No Love for Love," the Center's first anti-Valentine's Day show at the Apollo Theater on Monday, Feb. 12, eight local poets and writers will bare their embittered souls, or at least offer up an alternative to pink mylar balloons for any of us who've ever found Valentine's Day wanting.

A special guest that evening will be Ira Glass, public radio and soon-to-be-TV storyteller, long-time friend of Buscami and her organization. Turns out he's not overly fond of sappy verses or pudgy kids with arrows either, and sees this program filling a universal void.

Singled out

"We need an anti-Valentine's Day because most of us feel like

love isn't working for us the way we're told it should be," Glass says, noting that recent news stories reported that 51 percent of the country is single. "Clearly Valentine's Day is not speaking to everyone. Where is the holiday of troubled love, unrequited love, feeling too undesirable for love, feeling too screwed up to handle love? Those are the things that should be symbolized by a baby shooting an arrow."

A like-minded fellow on the program, Joel Chmara, 32, a spoken-word artist, open-mike emcee and poet who lives in Old Irving and teaches at the College of Lake County, will "retell a little something about a childhood crushing of my heart." It seems to have been a foretaste of other events of his romantic life.

"In college I got stood up for V-Day once and stayed in my room listening to Nine Inch Nails all night with a bottle of Wild Turkey. The Turkey gobbled something vicious," he says, and waxes philosophical. "We wouldn't have this holiday if St. Valentine didn't lead rats out of Ireland with the help of a shadowless groundhog."

Mary Fons, writer, actor and poetry slam champion, will host the proceedings. She makes it clear that, like the others on the program, it's not love they hate, but the hype, the materialism and the simple wrong-headedness of the celebration.

"Valentine's Day is this crappy holiday because it discriminates," Fons explains. "Everyone can celebrate Thanksgiving and 4th of July, but if you're not in love, or at least regularly shagging someone, you can't have any fun. No cards, no celebratory dinners. It sucks."

Bitter? But of course! It's a matter of chocolate. "I mean," Fons says, "hell, who doesn't like to get candy? If you have no honey on the 14th of February, sorry! No candy! Not unless you buy it

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Joel Chmara



Megan Steilstra

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for yourself, and that's sad. Trust me. I know from experience."

Superheroics

Megan Steilstra of Uptown agrees. "I'm totally a sappy romantic! I think that's part of being anti-Valentine's Day. It

just shouldn't happen in one day. It should happen all the time," she says.

Steilstra, 31, who has a penchant for superheroes in the Masters of the Universe mode, is a sometime spoken-word performer and fiction writer who teaches at Columbia College Chicago. For the show, she'll talk about her break-up with Indiana Jones last year. "We'd been together for a really long time and, as you'd proba-

bly expect, it was very awkward and horrible. Especially for my husband," she says.

Break-ups, of course, are another justification for this anti-Valentine's Day program. Even more than starry-eyed love, they inspire the kind of cliché romanticism — and bad poetry — that this anti-crew objects to. "Why rhyme 'love' with 'above,' when 'glove' and 'shove' are perfectly fine?" Chmara wonders.

Glass, too, who prefers his sentiments to be "a little more equivocal" and would be happy to discover, among the Valentine's Day cards, sentiments that would address the more mundane aspects of the love relationship, such as: "For my sweetest. Thanks for not doing any more that thing we talked about! That makes me feel closer to you on this special day."

In fact, says Fons, "we all

know that being in a relationship doesn't mean you're happy. So anyone who's anti-Valentine's Day who feels shame or guilt about that anti-ness should just stop it right now."

Appropriately, Fons lapses into poetry — her kind: "There is no shame in your game./Embrace your disdain./Valentine's Day is pretty silly."

"It promises," says Buscami, "to be an evening of bitterness, bile and fun."