Ghost Walk

usk settles over the William Pitt Student Union. A group circled outside begins to imagine the building as its former self, the old beaux-arts Hotel Schenley, which opened in 1898 and hosted the likes of iconic opera tenor Enrico Caruso, U.S. presidents Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, and the famed actress Sarah Bernhardt, among many other celebrities, politicians, performers, and business titans.

In a booming voice, a storyteller describes a spooky tale: A Russian ballet company was staying at the hotel, and the prima ballerina took a nap before the evening’s performance. Waking hours late, she rushed to the theater and found a furious director, who denoted the tardy dancer. Devastated, she returned to the hotel and committed suicide.

“But she remains,” the storyteller says somberly. “And if you fall asleep in the Red Room before your test, she will wake you up just in time to make it to class, as she does not want anyone else to sleep through an important event.”

This is just the kind of ghostly tale that drew the group of 40 on this tour hosted by Haunted Pittsburgh, an enterprise that’s in its second year of giving chills to tourists and native Pittsburghers alike. After telling of the ballerina’s demise, guide Sean Collier leads the group across Bigelow Boulevard to the next stop.

While they walk, Pitt alumnus Stephanie Lidgett Meshanko (SHRS ’98) taps Collier’s shoulder and points up at the Cathedral of Learning. She tells him that, while a student, she had an encounter with the ghost of Mary Schenley, a 19th-century philanthropist for whom Schenley Park is named. She supposedly roams the Cathedral.

When the group settles outside the Cathedral, Collier relays Meshanko’s story: Studying late one night on the 26th floor, looking for her friend heard singing. Looking for the singer, they searched the entire floor. They opened doors, but nobody was there. Then an elevator opened on the floor. The singing got louder. And louder. But—Collier says ominously—as the two approached, they realized the elevator was empty. Eeeewww.

Shivers run through the group. Collier continues the tour. “You’ll hear more about the ghost of Mary Schenley inside,” he says. “No one has ever seen her, but, according to a number of published sources, many people have heard her singing. And apparently, Stephanie is one of those.”

The tour group applauds. Then they file under the stone entranceway of the Cathedral, through the vintage revolving doors and past the wrought-iron gates, to huddle beneath the gothic ceiling and await the next thrilling tale.

—Adam Reger

A Dash of Writing

Wasabi peas, spicy trail mix, and ginger cakes imprinted with lotus flowers have drawn a dozen Pitt undergraduates to a table in the Writing Center. Some are Chinese exchange students who chatter in a mix of Mandarin and English. Others are U.S. students who sample the Chinese ginger cakes for the first time. They’re all here to participate in a special session of the Writers’ Café, a creative writing workshop that will focus on “spicy writing,” or the ways in which languages and dialects interact to create new meanings and words. They munch quietly or fiddle with their notebooks, perhaps because they’re shy or nervous to share their personal writing. Marylo Gramm, an instructor in the English department, soothes their nerves.

“Here, we are going to celebrate those ‘mistakes’ that are normally crossed out but sometimes are just another way of thinking that you convey through your writing,” she says. Then she asks the students to think of words or idioms that they like or that they hear in other languages or dialects of English but that don’t necessarily conform to traditional grammatical rules. To get them started, she recounts a nostalgic smile an expression her Yiddish-speaking mother used to say when angry: “A dark nightmare on your head!”

A few students giggle and share some expressions derived from Chinese: “Like playing a musical instrument to an ox.” “It’s people mountain people sea.” “I was thundered!” Gramm encourages them to spend the next half hour writing those spicy phrases into a story, essay, poem, or any literary form they prefer. “It can be so much spice that it burns our mouths,” she says, “or just a little bit of seasoning, however you’d like.”

The students tuck in their feet, round their shoulders, and retreat into their minds’ language powerhouses. For a long while, the only noises in the room are the scratches of pencils on paper and the occasional crunch of spicy snacks.

The Writing Center in Thaw Hall serves primarily as an academic resource for students seeking advice on writing for classes. But every other