

**Memorial Resolution**  
**ILINCA ZARIFOPOL-JOHNSTON**

Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston died on January 18, 2005, at the age fifty-two. She had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer five years before. Professor Zarifopol-Johnston was born in Romania, and received a bachelor's degree from the University of Bucharest in 1975. After her arrival in Bloomington she earned a doctorate on Comparative Literature from Indiana University, and in 1990 she began to teach as a member of the faculty in that department. Her study of the fiction of Hugo, Dickens, and Zola (*To Kill a Text*) was published in 1995. In recent years she translated some of the writing of Émile Cioran and the first volume of a trilogy of novels written by her father and published in Romania, and she wrote memoir of her life, family, and work with Cioran. Ilinca will be deeply missed by all who knew her. Several Faculty members and students shared their memories of her in reminiscences that were first published in the spring of 2005 in the newsletter of the Department of Comparative Literature.

# In memoriam: Department mourns Ilinca Johnston

*Professor Ilinca Johnston died on Jan. 18, 2005, at the age of 52. She had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer five years before. Johnston earned her PhD at Indiana University and had taught for the Department of Comparative Literature since 1990. She will be deeply missed by all who knew her. Several faculty members and a student shared their memories of Ilinca Johnston for this special section of the newsletter.*

## Matei Calinescu, emeritus professor

My wife and I were very close to Ilinca during the last months of her life. We had been good friends since her arrival in the United States, almost 30 years ago, where we preceded her by two or three years as émigrés from our native Romania, then under one of the harshest dictatorships in communist Eastern Europe. I had the privilege of having her as a student in my graduate courses, when I was immediately impressed with her brilliant mind and her vital presence in class, with her natural ability to create an atmosphere of genuine intellectual dialogue, rewarding for me and stimulating for the other students. I also regarded it as a privilege to be on her dissertation committee and was not surprised that she got our university's award for the best dissertation of the year. It was published as a book soon afterward. It was, however, as a colleague that I discovered, aside from her qualities as a scholar, her extraordinary commitment to the profession and to her, our, students. She had an unerring sense in spotting talent and encouraging it; she was admired and loved by her students for her generous intelligence, sparkling wit, high standards, and unusual human insight. On a personal level — and I am speaking now of my wife and me — her illness brought us much closer than ever before. Her suffering, over the last few years, was heartbreaking, but her attitude toward it was at the same time uplifting. We learned a lot from her. She was prepared to die but she loved life, almost mystically I would say, as the miracle it is. Her suffering made her keenly aware of this miracle and, for this reason, she did not reject her suffering, but put it to use as a means of understanding. She was, of course, sad when she told me, a couple of years ago: "Before being put to the test (of illness), we live almost like animals." She fought for life, courageously, relentlessly, with dignity and even serenity — for every month, week, hour, minute, and instant. All along, she testified for life, for the divinity of life (which most of us ignore or take for granted). When we last saw her, soon after her passing away, she looked frail, emaciated, as someone who had gone through

prolonged pain, not as a passive sufferer but as a witness — that is to say, thinking of the etymology of the word, as a martyr — a martyr of life, for life. She had that look on her now calm face. It had not been in vain. In the existential drama in which we are all caught, she had sacrificed herself for something she believed in deeply: for the miracle of life.

## Gilbert Chaitin, professor and acting chair

*A productive scholar, a renowned translator, an active member of the department, and a trusted friend.*

Ilinca Johnston's disappearance leaves a gap in our professional and personal lives that may in time be covered over but can never be filled.

I first met Ilinca when, in the 1980s, she took my course on the 19th-century French novel. In the course of discussing Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, I asked the class their opinion of Hugo's presentation of the Gypsies, and especially of their "queen," Esmeralda, the central female figure in the novel. Having grown up in Romania, Ilinca was the only one in the class to have real experience with the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and, thus, the only one to respond to my question. I realized then that she was a very special student, and I soon came to know that she was also a very special person. Her term paper on *Notre-Dame de Paris* for that class manifested her superior sensitivity to literary styles and her own talent for writing, in English as well as in her native Romanian and her near-native French, and it was gratifying to me that it became the subject of the first paper she presented at a professional conference. That paper was so well received that she soon became a regular participant at the annual 19th-Century French Studies Colloquium, and the room was always packed when she gave her talks. She later published a revised version of that talk, and still later it became the nucleus of one of the chapters of her doctoral dissertation and then of her book *To Kill a Text*. Several years later, she incorporated the novel into her ground-breaking Topics course *Beauty and the Beast*, which dealt with modern popular adaptations, in film and cartoons, of literary works considered to be classics.

While she was a graduate student, Ilinca taught Romanian language courses, first in the Department of French and Italian, then in the Slavics department. While her love for 19th-century European literature never



Eileen Julien, left, and Ilinca Johnston

waned, she eventually brought her interest in things Romanian into her research, turning her attention to translating and editing the early works of her compatriot Émile Cioran. Cioran lived most of his life in semi-voluntary exile in Paris and wrote most of his essays in French. Ilinca was the first to translate his earlier writings from Romanian into English, and her translations were enormously successful, praised by the critics and reprinted in paperback editions. She no doubt felt a great affinity with the writer, not only because of the similarity of their experiences in "exile," but also because of her admiration for his style and their shared existential concerns. As a result of her translations, Ilinca was invited to write a kind of autobiography, which became her *Memoirs of a Publishing Scoundrel: Searching for Cioran, Myself*, which she recently submitted to her agent. She had completed another work of translation, *The Last Boyar*, from the Romanian novel *Naufraziul* by Dinu Zarifopol and was working on other articles this past semester.

Twice winner of teaching awards, she was a fine teacher on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. She developed several innovative courses, including a graduate course she co-taught with Professor Eileen Julien on the literature of exile from Eastern Europe and Africa. Director of undergraduate studies for several years before her illness, director of graduate studies in 2003–04, elected to our Chair's Advisory Committee numerous times, one of the most active and innovative members of many departmental committees over the years, Ilinca had a deep commitment to the department and to the integrity of faculty governance, as well as to the wider discipline of comparative literature.

## Sumie Jones, professor

When Ilinca took over the position of director of graduate studies in our de-

partment, I sent her a message of congratulations since I took it as a sign of her complete recovery. I did advise her not to let herself work too hard for a while. Her response was a very happy one, full of confidence about her health as well as her work. So her death left me in a shock. I will miss her elegantly cheerful presence on our campus.

**David Kaplin, doctoral student**

From the moment I first met Professor Ilinca Johnston — confident, stylish, and frank — at the comparative literature fall reception nearly a decade ago, I was intimidated, but also mesmerized. As I listened to her talk about her work and her teaching, I soon realized, still with a little trepidation, that I wanted to work with her, not only because of her expertise in 19th-century fiction, but also because I was drawn to her confidence, her style, and her frankness. In teaching her engaging parody class and meeting with me as a member of my exam committee, Ilinca always emphasized content and ideas — what one has to say — as a scholar's chief concern. Even in the middle of my oral exam, she wouldn't let me get away with finessing one of her direct questions by stringing together tangential details: "Oh, David," she exclaimed, "you are giving me such a headache. There is no reason for curtains if there is nothing in the window!" Through that experience and later, with my dissertation prospectus, she helped me develop one of the most crucial skills a scholar must acquire — knowing what questions to ask oneself about literature in order to have something meaningful and original to say. That's an amazing gift, and I owe a great deal of my own academic confidence to her guidance and example. It's also an amazing legacy, because that's how, with great fondness and gratitude, I will remember Ilinca Johnston, every time I realize that I do have something meaningful to say.

**Oscar Kenshur, professor and chair**

Margot and I learned of Ilinca's death here in Aix-en-Provence. Being in a lovely place far from Bloomington did not make the news easier to bear. We regretted not being back home to commiserate with Ken, Teddy, and Mathew and the rest of Ilinca's family, whose grief is beyond our comprehension, and with the many friends who, like us, are devastated by the loss.

I think of Ilinca in many roles: as a dynamic, innovative, and sympathetic teacher; as a brilliant scholar and critic; as a colleague whose deep commitment to comparative literature never flagged, even when she was struggling with her relentless illness; as a charming, dear, and loyal friend.

But the image that most haunts me is that of Ilinca welcoming one into her home or presiding over a dinner or a reception. I'm trying to avoid the word "hostess" because it is so woefully inadequate. She was more like a tutelary spirit ushering one into a magical realm, a place — whether it was the house on Atwater or the converted windmill in Mallorca that she so loved — that was made magical by her graciousness, her energy, her mere presence.

As I look out my window at the cypresses, the tile roofs, the mountains, and the blue sky, all vivid and intense thanks to the famous Provençal light, I think about how vivid and radiant Ilinca was, and how much Bloomington will be darkened and diminished by her absence.

**Rosemarie McGerr, associate professor**

Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston was an excellent scholar, a creative teacher, and a gracious, generous colleague. Her memory will remain strong through her scholarship and her influence on her students. Her long-term contributions to our department helped shape our programs of study. Be-

cause she and I often consulted on matters of departmental administration, my favorite memories of Ilinca involve mugs of tea and discussions of undergraduate or graduate policies. Her sense of humor made some of the more mundane aspects of university life more pleasurable. We all will miss working with Ilinca very much. Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to her family.

**Angela Pao, associate professor and director of graduate studies**

I first met Ilinca during my on-campus interview at IU. One of the most vivid impressions I had was of walking down Kirkwood to have lunch at the Uptown. There were a few people in the group, but it was Ilinca who was striding along beside me all the way, promoting the virtues of intellectual life at Bloomington. You'll get so much work done, she said, because it's like living in a monastery. While Ilinca's recruiting pitch proved irresistible, "monastic" would not be a word that comes to mind in describing her own rich life, which found constant expression in the many incarnations of her fierce gaze.