What We Lost When *Lingua Franca* Fell

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

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In the early summer of 1995, in a cramped, cluttered newsstand in Greenwich Village, I purchased my first copy of *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life*. The headline grabbed me: "Inventing Wills: How an Ex-Jesuit, Sometime Professor Became America's Heavyweight Know-It-All." I was intrigued that *Lingua Franca*'s writer, Adam Begley, had somehow convinced the brilliant and irascible Garry Wills, who rarely grants interviews, to cooperate with a full-length profile. Begley's piece was startlingly powerful and intimate, filled with witty asides and shrewd assessments of Wills and his work. Rarely had I seen writing that was so edgy and compelling.

I had just launched a career as a free-lance writer, and the few clips I had were from obscure publications. Nevertheless, I dispatched a blind story pitch to *Lingua Franca*'s young editor, Alexander Star. Two days later my phone rang; it was Star. "Let's do it," he declared. Two weeks after that, I was on a plane to Chicago to report the piece, which turned out to be five thousand words long. It was the beginning of a relationship that endured until October 2001, when the news of *Lingua Franca*'s demise spread quickly through New York's literary and journalistic community.

Founded in 1990, *Lingua Franca* did for academia what *The American Lawyer* did for the legal profession: it cast a calm searchlight on the nooks and crannies — and follies — of university life and conveyed its findings in crisp, lean prose. But it was not merely a magazine about professors. Its beat, instead, was the vast universe where academia collided with the real world. Like William Shawn's *New Yorker* or Lewis Lapham's *Harper's*, *Lingua Franca* concerned itself with both the quirky and the profound. It was a magazine for people who liked to read and think, and they were richly rewarded with articles about Jorge Luis Borges's translators and James Joyce's manuscripts; about cannibalism and fingerprinting; about academic murder scandals in Italy and pro-Milosevic intellectuals in Yugoslavia, to name but a few.

For young writers, *Lingua Franca* provided unique opportunities for long-form narrative journalism. It gave writers the freedom — and the space — to pursue their passions. This I know firsthand. In 1999, in the shabby outskirts of Mexico City, fifty thousand students shut down the sprawling campus of the University of Mexico, Latin America's largest university. It was not only a civil war between proud, politicized students and the Mexican government, but also a fierce class conflict between impoverished and bourgeois undergraduates. Faculty members were also bitterly split. In short, it was a perfect *Lingua Franca* story: there was a powerful academic angle, but larger themes were also present — underdevelopment, class mobility, political commitment.

When Star first asked me to write about the strike, I declined: I had witnessed it, and was intimidated by its complexity. But Star refused to take no for an answer, and, what's more, he found the money to send me to Mexico City for two weeks. After several grueling rewrites — *Lingua Franca* was journalistic boot camp — the editors, in their ongoing quest for perfection, found a native speaker of Spanish to fact-check the piece, all 6,500 words of it. It turned out to be the most satisfying journalistic experience I had ever had.

Lingua Franca left a mark on the profession: it did much to invent an entire genre of intellectual reporting, one that *The New York Times* felt compelled to imitate by launching a Saturday section entitled "Arts & Ideas"; many of its writers and editors graduated to *The New Yorker* and the *Times*; it was nominated for the National Magazine Award on five separate occasions. But the good times couldn't last: *Lingua Franca*, unlike *Harper's* or *The New Republic*, failed to attract a sizeable readership outside academia. The circulation never exceeded twenty thousand — a figure that in no way corresponded to the magazine's influence, for it was noticed and read in the higher echelons of Manhattan's media and publishing universe. *Lingua Franca* is currently seeking new investors, but its heavy losses, believed to be $200,000 a year, suggest that its revival may be a long shot.

When the end came, on October 17, it was as if a meteor hit. There was generous praise from literary heavyweights — "I always found something fascinating to read in that magazine, and not infrequently something that I wish we had had for *The New Yorker*," David Remnick told *The New York Times*. But the staff was instantly discharged, with no severance pay, and gloom and melancholy pervaded the magazine's community. Still, for a short time, those of us in that community tasted pure journalistic freedom, which liberated us, in the roaring 1990s, from having to write about Bill Gates's fortune, O.J. Simpson's Bronco, or Monica Lewinsky's dress. ■

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