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A poet's last stand: Though critically ill, Morton Marcus insists on living the remainder of his life with energy, grace and humor

By WALLACE BAINE
 Posted: 08/30/2009 01:30:27 AM PDT

If you're planning to go see Morton Marcus speak at what's being billed as his "last poetry reading," you'd better bring a sense of humor. Because he'll certainly be armed with his.

The celebrated Santa Cruz poet, film critic and memoirist is gravely ill with cancer and facing what is certain to be the last months of his life. But he's not about to bow down to death and begin living any differently than he has lived in the past.

"I don't wrestle with mortality," he said. "He doesn't play fair."

In fact, Marcus, 72, is not even giving in to the notion that Tuesday's event at the Capitola Book Cafe will be his last poetry reading "Maybe," he said. It's not so much the sobering finality of such a pronouncement that he's resisting, it's the grandiosity of the idea.

"I'm just trying to live my life the way I've always lived it," he said. "I just believe in humor. I'm still telling bad jokes. But now that I'm sick, I expect people to laugh at them."

To illustrate his keep-on-keeping-on attitude, Marcus tells a story about an emotional conversation he had with his wife Donna shortly after his terminal diagnosis.

"She said, I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you keep your spirits up. One day, those spirits are going to fly right out the window.' And I said, Well, what do you want me to do? Go open the window?"

Tuesday's reading will consist of personal favorites from many of Marcus' past books of poetry, plus the announcement



of two positive developments in his poetry career: the publication of his latest book, "The Star Wizard's Legacy," Marcus's translation of the work of the late Serbian poet Vasko Popa; and the impending publication of what is likely to be his last volume of poems, to be titled "The Dark Figure in the Doorway." He will read some of the "Dark Figure" poems at Tuesday's event, he said.

Despite diminished strength and energy, Marcus has continued to perform the public roles he has played for years since retiring after a long career teaching literature and writing at Cabrillo College -- leading regular Saturday morning film discussions at the Nickelodeon and co-hosting the locally produced film-review show "Cinema Scene." Neither gig is he willing to give up quite yet. "As long as my brain functions, I'm just going to keep doing it till I just can't do it anymore."

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In 2008, Marcus published "Striking Through the Masks," part memoir of his youth, part meditation on the great poets he has known, both as a poet of repute, and as a host of the longtime KUSP "Poetry Show." The publication of "Masks," said Marcus, has "made my dying easier. To not have told that story and talk about the other poets would have been difficult."

Marcus said he finds ruminating on his own death an exercise in narcissism that he avoids as much as possible, instead focusing on the small blessings of everyday life. In the end, there is no aphorism that makes any sense of the drama of mortality.

"The whole experience of life and death is just absurd. This is a universe that keeps rolling along killing

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everything in its path, and we try to make sense of it. It's ridiculous."

Yet the struggle to maintain his lifestyle in the face of painful treatments has taught him a few things about the emotional strength it takes to face the stiff headwinds of mortal illness. Reflecting his lifelong love of film, Marcus turns to the memorable climactic scene of the classic 1954 film "On the Waterfront."

"There's the scene on the waterfront when Lee J. Cobb and his goons get Marlon Brando down in the meeting house there and just beat the hell out of him and leave him there. Karl Malden and Eva Marie Saint jump down in there and say, 'You all right? We got to get you an ambulance.' And Brando says, 'No, no. Just stand me up.' And they lift him up into a standing position, and he says, 'Am I standing?'"

Marcus added, his voice thick with emotion. "Yeah, I know what that's like."

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'I HAVE LIVED LONG ENOUGH,'

By Morton Marcus
 I have lived long enough
 to know that one day
 the earth will forget
 I am here, and will turn
 from me as if I was a beggar
 hot and dusty from the road.
 I will be abandoned
 in a marketplace by the living
 who will have gone home
 to lunch, leaving me
 with the broken crates,
 orange rinds and wilted lettuce.
 This does not disturb me.
 In a peculiar way
 it excites me, making me
 enter each new day
 like a beggar in a story
 who limps onto the page
 from over a hill, bringing
 news of miracles in other lands
 and asks only that the cities
 and skirted figures in his words
 remain with you
 in the marketplace
 when he is gone.

IF YOU GO

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 Where: Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave.,
 Capitola
 Cost: Free
 Details: 464-8983 or poetrysantacruz.org

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