

The Sun

New Debate Series Addresses Pressing Questions of the Day

By ANNIE KARNI
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In a packed auditorium at the Asia Society and Museum earlier this month, a panel of distinguished scholars, editors, and filmmakers debated the motion: "Hollywood fuels anti-Americanism abroad." The hour-and-a-half conversation about whether the film industry or the war in Iraq was more to blame for growing international ill-will toward America was part of a new live debate series called Intelligence Squared, which is funded by the Rosenkranz Foundation.

The debate series is seeking to trade punditry for dialogue, according to the executive producer, Dana Wolfe. The series caters to an intellectual audience eager for more than sound bites on political and social issues of international concern.

"Media was getting too partisan, Congress was getting too bitter and rancorous — even ordinary social conversations about public policy were getting too angry and emotional," the chairman of the Rosenkranz Foundation, Robert Rosenkranz, said.

The debate series should "expose people to both sides of an argument and foster greater respect for the opposing view," Mr. Rosenkranz said.

Debaters have included columnist Christopher Hitchens, the editor of the *Paris Review*, Philip Gourevitch, and the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Daniel Ayalon.

At the Hollywood debate, witty and convincing arguments were greeted with laughter and applause from the audience. "Anti-Americanism abroad would exist without Hollywood, just as cancer would exist without cigarette smoke," a panelist for the motion, Roger Kimball, said. "But Hollywood tends to make the malignancy worse."

Mr. Kimball, an editor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, said Hollywood films foster a view of America as "a decadent society in love with nihilism."

Speaking against the motion, a screenwriter, Richard Walter, said Hollywood films "show that we're an open society." The violence and sex in such films "was not invented by 11 Jews at Paramount Studios a couple of weeks ago."

Before the debate, a majority of the audience said they favored the motion or were undecided; afterward, 59% voted against the motion.

Debate topics in the series range from whether America should tolerate a nuclear Iran to whether freedom of expression includes the right to offend. The debates have not been advertised, Mr. Rosenkranz said. Instead, he is sending out invitations to leading journalists, investment bankers, public policy scholars, and political donors.

"The idea is that the quality of the questions would be higher, and the evenings would have not only an intellectual dimension, but also a social dimension," Mr. Rosenkranz said.

"I think the format causes the audience to focus much more intensely than it would if it was just a lecture on the same subject," the chief investment strategist for the hedge fund Pequot Capital, Byron Wien, said. "There was an element of competition and excitement about it."

"The audience was very engaged, physically responding to the debate," the publisher of *Dead Horse Media*, Elizabeth Spiers, said. Ms. Spiers only criticism was of the format. "I think they let the panelists talk too long," she said.

The form is traditional, Oxford-debate style: one side of three speakers proposes a motion and another side of three speakers opposes the motion. An impartial moderator presides over the debate, and the audience, which votes before and after the debate, decides the winner by its final vote.

"I came away with a good feeling about the exercise," a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Joshua Muravchik, said after participating in the Hollywood debate.

Intelligence Square members who pay a minimum of \$10,000 for the series are invited to dine with the panelists after the debates. Individual tickets are also available for \$40 a debate.

Next season's motions will include: "America is Too Damn Religious," "Global Warming is Not a Crisis," "Better More Domestic Surveillance Than Another 9/11," and "A Booming China Spells Trouble for America."