



WEYE

# Not Just Talk

With a quirky docket of intellectual events, Paul Holdengräber has turned the New York Public Library into an after-dark hot spot.

Photograph by CHAD PITMAN

**I**t's a Friday night at the New York Public Library and writer Jonathan Ames is telling a standing-room-only crowd about fighting in a bare-knuckle boxing match against a man he met on a phone-sex line. Both men wore only underwear, and the prize for the winner was too X-rated to be spelled out here. Mrs. Astor probably would not have approved.

Run by a quietly patrician board of trustees and long supported by Park Avenue patronesses—Brooke Astor has donated more than \$25 million—the library has a reputation for staid propriety. Recently, however, the institution has, to use an apt phrase, turned a page. On any given evening, a line of chic under-40s can be seen snaking out the door, waiting to hear, for instance, Wilco's Jeff Tweedy discuss file sharing or Bill Clinton chat about race in America. The man to thank—or to blame, depending on whether you think libraries should deal only in literary fare—is Paul Holdengräber, an exuberant 46-year-old with an unplaceable accent and the ability to quote Thomas Jefferson and Leonard Cohen in a single sentence, as he did at the aforementioned Friday-night event. “That has nothing to do with what I’m talking about,” he then quipped to the audience. “I just thought I would show you that I was quite well educated.”

Holdengräber—who lives with his wife, Barbara, and their two young sons in Brooklyn—is the library's director of public programs, but his role is much more interesting than it sounds. When library president Paul LeClerc hired him in 2004, he charged him with “oxygenating” the library. “And when I landed in New York, I heard there was an ozone alert,” says Holdengräber over coffee at a midtown café. “So I knew I was in the

right place.” He quickly got to work, renaming what had been called PEP—“It stood for public education programs, but I think it sounds like something you take for a stomachache”—Live From the NYPL and pushing the start of events from 6 p.m. to 7 so young professionals could attend. He replaced dry readings with wild debates and quirky performances. “The average age, on a good day, was 63, and we had to change that,” says Holdengräber, who, though quite personable, enjoys ruffling feathers. “I’m an instigator,” he says.

Maira Kalman, who staged her musical version of *The Elements of Style* at the library last year, sees Holdengräber differently. “He’s one of the most romantic people I know,” she says. “He has unchecked enthusiasm and passion for everything he’s involved in.”

Holdengräber's parents, Eastern European Jews, were raised in Vienna and fled to Haiti during World War II. Paul was born in Houston, and soon after the family returned to Europe, settling in Brussels, Belgium. After studying law at Belgium's Université Catholique de Louvain and philosophy at the Sorbonne, he earned his Ph.D. in comparative literature at Princeton, where he went on to teach. A fellowship at the Getty Research Institute brought him to L.A., and in 1997, he was recruited by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to found and direct its Institute for Art & Cultures, which he did for seven years—successfully enough to make him something of a cultural celebrity in L.A. and earn him the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French government.

Thus far, Holdengräber's tenure in New York has been just as propitious, though he admits there have been doubters. “I would be completely unsuccessful if there weren't people who were critical,” he says. But LeClerc, for his part, seems more than happy with his hire. “There's a new sparkle and level of imagination,” he says.

Many of Holdengräber's best gets result from his simply cold-calling people he finds interesting. “I'm not really shy,” he says, smirking at the understatement. And neither is he shy about his ambitions. When asked whether he'd want to run a major cultural institution like the library, he doesn't hesitate. “Very, very, very much,” he says, adding that he also wouldn't mind having a TV chat show. But until then, he's more than happy to continue his quest for what he calls “the perfect dialogue” on the library's stage. “Something you hear can change your life!” he declares with even more than his usual gusto. “It can! It can!” —JENNY COMITA

Paul Holdengräber in the New York Public Library's Rose Reading Room

