

PETER DOUGLAS ARNOTT
1931-1990

After he had faced major surgery this past summer, Peter's teaching schedule was changed. We wanted to give him a lighter load. He would have none of it. "I'll beat this thing," he said, and went on to talk of his classes for the fall, the play he wanted to direct this spring, and his part in the dedication of our new Marston Balch Arena Theater next October. Well, even giants cannot beat all things. On October 31, he gave back-to-back lectures, brilliant lectures his students have said. In less than forty-eight hours, he passed away.

Born in Ipswich, England, Peter earned a Bachelor's degree from the University of Wales, a second Bachelor's from Oxford. On completing his Ph.D. at the University of Wales in 1958, he joined the faculty of the State University of Iowa. In 1969, he was persuaded to forsake the Hawkeyes for the Jumbos. His appointment at Tufts made him the youngest professor on our faculty at that time. He served as department chair from 1975 to 1981.

Most of us struggle to find the right word, the telling phrase; for Peter, it seemed automatic. He would take a legal pad, sit on his couch, and begin. What resulted usually needed no rewriting, but did require a skilled typist to decipher. Perhaps that ease partly explains his prodigious publication record. His more than twenty-five books and innumerable articles explore the classical theater, the theaters of Japan, and of Moliere, and the list includes many of his translations. Noting that most classical scholars translate for the solitary reader, Peter translated for the actor, for the watching and listening audience. His last completed book, Public Performance in the Greek Theater, won the coveted "Choice Outstanding Book Award." He left an unfinished manuscript on the works of Menander. His last production was also interrupted. He was rehearsing his translation of Menander's Dyskolos when he was hospitalized a year ago last January.

Peter was a scholar, a teacher, an artist. Perhaps his ability as a lecturer is best illustrated by one anecdote. One morning, as he started down an aisle in Cohen Auditorium, he turned to a graduate student and asked, "What's the play today?" Without a break in stride, he continued, and by the time he turned to face the more than three hundred students enrolled, he was in full voice. One hour later, without resorting to note or book, without pause (except for dramatic effect), he had completed another telling lecture. He was a vital part of our graduate program, conducting seminars, directing theses and dissertations. And he carried this mission beyond the campus; he was always ready to lecture to, or work with, a church group or community organization.

He brought so much more to the campus and to the community. He brought the theater. He directed over twenty productions in the Tufts Arena and nearly twenty in theaters across in the midwest. Who will forget the wit and style of Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest or Coward's Blythe Spirit, the depth and integrity in Ibsen's A Doll's House and Anouilh's Antigone, the sheer joy and exuberance in Plautus' Haunted House or Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer. When not directing, he was apt to turn actor. He loved the theater, he lived the theater. It is not possible to suggest his crowning achievement. However, his marionette theater would have to be listed as a strong choice. Those fortunate enough to have seen one of his performances recognize that it was probably more in the style of ancient performance than those created by living actors on today's stage. In the immense Greek amphitheaters, often seating up to fifteen thousand spectators, the actor would be dwarfed. To be seen by even half of that audience, movement and gesture had to be big, broad, and stylized, as are the movements of marionettes. In large and small colleges and universities, Peter performed his repertoire of twenty classic plays in forty-seven states and in most of the provinces of Canada.

In 1986-87, he was a Phi Beta Kappa traveling scholar. Among other honors and awards: Doctor of Humane Letters from Suffolk University, American Theatre Association best article of the year award, the Shaw medal.

But still we have not managed to measure the man--his firmness with recalcitrant students, his patience with those genuinely trying, his quick but gentle quip to deflate academic pomposity, his pride in his wife and three children and their accomplishments. Or the sight of him walking his dog in the early morning hours: to the unknowing, he seemed to be talking to himself; to others, he was running lines for another marionette performance. Or his model railroad nearly filling his attic, complete with a cemetery and headstones marking unpopular graduate students or certain administrators. Or his heroic recounting of how he inadvertently beached his sailboat on the Winchester Lakes.

How would Peter have reacted to this statement? He would have been embarrassed, suggested that we should have better things to do with our time, that we ought to get on with it. But, even so: we have come, not to bury Caesar, but to praise him.

Read by Professor Sherwood (Jerry) Collins at the Arts and Sciences Faculty Meeting on February 11, 1991.

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