Resolution on the Retirement of
Downing Cless, Department of Drama and Dance

When Downing Cless joined the Tufts Drama Department in 1979, it sorely needed him. Although the tenured faculty members included internationally acclaimed scholars, junior faculty members came and went through a constantly revolving door. As a result, the acting and directing programs were in disarray. In short space, Downing, who had been tasked with setting them in order, showed his organizational skills and did wonders. He received tenure and promotion to associate professor in record time – in three years.

Downing’s background had prepared him well for this assignment. He had received his Master of Arts in Dramatic Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1971, and then moved to Sociology for his doctorate at Brandeis University. His first professional appointment was as an instructor in Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts before he served for seven years as an assistant professor of theater at Antioch College.

In some respects, Downing was the social conscience of our department. He insisted on the contemporary relevance of the ethical issues raised in drama. To this end, he took part in the Tisch College for Citizenship and Public Service from 2004 to 2011. Most recently, his activism was been concentrated on the environment. It culminated in his ground-breaking book Ecology and Environment in European Drama (Routledge, 2010), which has been favorably reviewed by the critical community. Many of its insights result from Downing’s close acquaintance with plays from having staged them.

These social and political concerns were thus embodied in his productions: the plight of the homeless in a modern-dress Lower Depths, the irrationality of government in The White House Murder Case, threats to the ecology in Rain, Some Fish, No Elephants, corporate greed run amok in The Madwoman of Chaillot. A contemporary sensibility electrified his staging of playwrights from Aristophanes and Marlowe, to Brecht and Tennessee Williams. This combination of political engagement with stage practice could be seen even more clearly in his work with professional Boston and Cambridge companies, among others Stage Left, TheaterWorks and particularly the Underground Railway Theater, on whose board of directors he serves. Off-campus his premieres of important plays and experiments with collectively created works have won awards.

Downing served as department chair for two terms, for six years and again for three. These were periods of considerable change and growth for the department, as it enlarged and diversified its faculty and strengthened its graduate program. Spearheading many of these initiatives, Downing brought to them his characteristic meticulousness and conscientiousness. He carefully fostered the careers of the junior faculty and offered sound advice to his senior colleagues. Among the new directions were courses in African-American, Asian and Latin American theatre along with our growing involvement in film studies.

Even-tempered, well-considered in his judgments, Downing is nevertheless capable of healthy indignation at abuses and injustice. He is a consensus-builder, never working unilaterally but consulting and taking under serious advisement the opinions of his colleagues and his students. His concern for students’ growth and welfare is genuine, particularly evident in his directing classes and his own rehearsal practices. His interest in them is returned by affection and respect, lightened by the friendly caricatures of his speaking style performed in the end-of-year Spaghetti Night gambols. His attention to our alumni and efforts to keep them engaged began even before the digital age made this kind of outreach easier. He was instrumental in creating the annual P. T. Barnum Awards which recognize the achievements of our former students in the performing arts, many of whom discovered their potential under his tutelage.

Downing plans to devote significant time to climate activism, to his continuing association with the Central Square Theatre and to travel with his wife, former dance professor Alice Trexler, to visit their children Elliott and Isabelle who currently reside in Chicago and Cleveland. Since he lives in Arlington, we hope to see him around the Balch Arena Theatre for many years to come.

Respectfully submitted,

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Department of Drama and Dance