

Russ McDonald (1949-2016)

Russ McDonald died after a sudden stroke on 29 June 2016 just hours after his sixty-seventh birthday. He had held many offices for the SAA, crowned by his year as President in 2012. His Presidential speech included a witty poem about, well, us, and the academy, and the work; he also proposed new work for members to do, that of memory, of reminiscences that, once assembled, might give a sense of what the SAA has done in its years of evolution and revolution since combining an annual conference with a high-quality hotel to offer members a short break in an interesting city, with innovative seminars (<http://www.shakespeareassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/McDonald-address1.pdf>). Russ participated every year, and organized a variety of meetings and meals which always felt more play than work. He was a good listener, a tactful speaker, an acute reader of others' prose, and a skilled diplomat. He was that old-fashioned thing, a Southern Gentleman, with a supreme gift for friendship. What he was not included short-tempered, prejudiced, entitled, tactless, mean-spirited (but he was endowed with just the right leaven of malice). He whistled tunefully, beautifully, and with brio.



In this age of instant fame, Russ has no Wikipedia page to himself, but he is mentioned or quoted on other pages almost nine hundred times. He was never a flash-in-the-pan thrusting young man, but a scholar and critic who slowly built reputations across different aspects of early modern culture and, latterly, as an opera critic. He always seemed so at ease with himself and the world that one forgets that he was the son of relatively under-educated parents; that his difficult father returned from WWII only to be drafted again for Korea; and that he was the first in his family to graduate from university, at Duke, where he was elected Phi Beta Kappa. Like many from such backgrounds, he discovered higher education with the thrill of being taken seriously among like-minded people, and teachers who did everything to bring him on. After Duke, he moved north to the University of Pennsylvania to do a doctorate in English literature and wrote a thesis on Ben Jonson and the comedy of intrigue, which, as *Shakespeare and Jonson/ Jonson and Shakespeare*, became his first book, a fine demonstration of close reading. He went on to write about historical theater practitioners of Shakespearean roles; to be a fine editor of Shakespeare, most recently with Lena Cowen Orlin for the Bedford Shakespeare; and he wrote magisterially about Shakespeare as a close reader with intent.

Growing up in Houston, he, a talented cellist, played in the youth orchestras of Texas, and, having made music, listened endlessly and acutely to opera, including, in his London life, writing regularly for *Opera Magazine* (over fifty reviews, accurate, historically informed, amusing, often laugh-out-loud amusing) and for *The Times Literary Supplement* (but never on opera). Friends were delighted to be invited to accompany him to The Royal Opera House Covent Garden, The English National Opera, Glyndebourne, and points south and east from Paris to Bayreuth.

Play mattered to him. While his game was tennis, he appreciated the great strengths of Duke University on the basketball court, and if March Madness coincided with SAA, he led fine Shakespeareans astray to keep him company in whatever low bar had good sports coverage. Given the animation of his face, it seems a considerable achievement that he played poker with friends in Greensboro and didn't leave the table skint. In London life he began to master the rules of rugby football, and turned himself tentatively to the intricacies of cricket. He loved art, and collected what he liked; his younger brother, Mark, was

an early promoter of American Modernist furniture, and they shared an interest in Modernist painting and photography. He joined a London club, and not just any club, but the Athenaeum, as well as the London Library. Russ was greedy for life and took with both hands what London had to offer.

He was bold in his career, both in research and in teaching, not to mention being willing—from the start—to move when the time was ripe. As for many young academics in the '70s, the oil crises made permanent appointments hard to come by. Having experienced the distracting busyness of life as a Teaching Fellow at Penn, he began as an Instructor at Mississippi State University, for two long years. Then he moved—about as far away as it is possible to move—to the University of Hawaii, where he was happy for two years, and where he retained friends for the rest of his life, as he did from Rochester, where he taught from 1979 to 1992. In many *CVs* one sees a blip, and Russ's move to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro—not the star campus of the State's university system—was made in order to attain a spousal hire which would give both him and his wife, Gail, secure jobs in the same place. Between them they garnered bouquets of recognition for teaching and research, and Gail was one of the founders (and second president) of the Modernist Studies Association, in which she has held a variety of roles. To list Russ's fellowships is to list the great names of a variety of institutions: NEH (several times), the Folger (where he taught for the NEH summer school for teachers), Bogliasco, Mellon. Russ and Gail—like many American scholars—bought a tiny flat in London, so that they could spend their summers in the British Library and, it must be said, take advantage of London's wealth of theatres. They began to long to spend more time in London, and Russ applied for, and was appointed to, a Readership at Goldsmiths College, soon improved to a Chair. They had resigned their posts in Greensboro, sold their house and its contents, and in 2006 set off, with Lizzie, their cat. Their son, Jack, remained at university in the States. Gail rapidly found a post at Southampton University—commuting at last—from which she also moved north to Goldsmiths. She helped organize, and then became director, of the T. S. Eliot summer school for two years, a tenure brutally terminated by Russ's death.

Russ was the author or (co-)editor of eight books, including the *Bedford Shakespeare*, and five single-text plays in the Pelican Shakespeare. He was much in demand as a contributor to collections of essays, and, since the year 2000 he had published over twenty essays, some still to appear. He was a stylish, witty writer—as he was a speaker—who branched out more, not less, as he grew older. His short book in the Oxford Topics series, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* and its longer cousin, *Shakespeare's Late Style*, have become standard works. He launched himself on a new monograph, a sample of which can be found in an article on “Ornament” in Bruce R. Smith's *World Shakespeare Encyclopedia*. He saw in period habits of decoration certain similarities, if not parallels, in decor, gardens, clothing, and—invariably—writing that bound together a number of disparate activities and expertises. Russ and I read each other's drafts over almost twenty years, and I confess that it was only listening to a paper given in a panel for the Paris celebrations of Shakespeare's 450th birthday that I finally understood what he would be at—a brilliant and original exploration of style and structure across the arts. Russ was relieved. This autumn he and Gail would have spent their last leave before retirement in Manhattan, testing the waters of New York as a possible place to live next.

Ruth Morse