

Homer “Murph” Swander, 1921-2018

The world lost a titan in Shakespeare teaching and scholarship when Homer “Murph” Swander died on February 15 at the age of ninety-six. According to his daughter, Susan, he died peacefully and without pain. His wife, Laura, died just over a year ago at the age of ninety-three. They were married for seventy-three years.

Swander received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and spent his long teaching career at the University of California at Santa Barbara. While he leaves behind thousands of former students who benefited from his teaching, his reputation as a revolutionary thinker in Shakespeare pedagogy spread far beyond the campus of UCSB. For decades, he organized and led educational tours to London to attend productions and visit with the actors and directors whose work he admired. His collaborations with members of the Royal Shakespeare Company, most notably Sir Patrick Stewart, led to the formation of the Association for Creative Theatre, Education, and Research (ACTER) in 1975. The group, which brings professional actors to college campuses for week-long residencies, continues today as Actors from the London Stage (AFTLS), housed at the University of Notre Dame. British actor David Rintoul, writing in Mary Zenet Maher’s collection, *Modern Hamlets and their Soliloquys* (University of Iowa Press, 2003), claimed that ACTER “has had the immediate and salutary effect of drawing closer together the research and teaching of Shakespeare at all instructional levels in the English-speaking world.” In 2015, the Shakespeare Guild in London honored Professor Swander and ACTER/AFTLS for their forty-year history of “extraordinary contributions to our understanding and presentation of classics by Shakespeare and other dramatists.”

One of the great privileges of my life was to be Murph’s student in two classes at UCSB in the early 1980s. On the first day of class, he walked in, held up a small paperback version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and said something to the effect of, “This is not a play. This is a script. Inside this script are many plays, and your job is to find one that makes sense.” The key, he told us, was not just to read Shakespeare, but to “do” Shakespeare—to get inside the shoes of actors and directors. He gathered us into scene groups and set us to the task of mining the script for clues, or “signals” as he called them, that we could translate into performance. He prodded us to generate as many options as possible in rehearsal, and then to consider how those choices affected the story our scenes would tell. The term culminated in performances of the scenes and discussions of what each group had presented.

Murph was far ahead of the curve when it came to what is now called “student-centered” instruction. Attending his class was never like sitting in a typical lecture. As our groups worked on our feet, encountering textual problems through movement, voice, and gesture, he would watch, occasionally gathering us to observe one group as he pointed them toward some seemingly insignificant detail. We learned that for actors of Shakespeare, there are no insignificant details. We also wrote for him, but the papers weren’t typical thematic analyses built around some literary device or element. We would essay to defend performance choices we made based on the signals in the script, explaining how those choices illuminated the text for us. His approach transformed my thinking about Shakespeare, about reading, and about myself.

Despite his devotion to using theatrical methods in literature classes, Murph was not an actor; he was a scholar. Like many in his generation, he considered the original texts as the ultimate

authority, encouraging students to examine quarto or folio facsimiles of the scripts and to be skeptical of editorial incursions in published versions. He dismissed bracketed stage directions as unnecessary and often inaccurate. "These people are editors, not actors," he would say. In that sense, he was also an activist. He maintained an uncompromising bardolatry that may seem quaint today, but he never lost his passion for the work or his conviction that the text mattered. When I visited him and Laura at their home two years ago, I found Murph sitting in his living room chair, surrounded by his manuscripts. At 94, he was still furthering his ideas, with hundreds of typewritten pages and notes written in longhand. He leaves behind an unpublished body of work that I hope will see the light of day, for posterity.

I don't know of anyone who did more than Murph to bridge the sometimes disparate worlds of the theatre and the academy. His academic descendants extend across continents, disciplines, and multiple generations. Many in the Shakespeare community knew him much better than I, as colleagues and as friends. I knew him as a professor who impacted my life and exerted a deep influence on my teaching. May flights of angels sing him to his rest.

--Tim Duggan