



Stephen R. Cole

April 20, 1933 – August 11, 2015

Retired professor of Theater, Stephen Cole, who helped establish one of the nation's first master's programs in Acting at Cornell, in the 1960s, died Aug. 11, 2015 at Hospicare in Ithaca. He was 82.

Cole was born in New York City, grew up in the Midwest and began a life in the theater performing comedy and dance professionally while in his teens. Actor Barnard Hughes was among his early mentors.

A graduate of the University of Iowa and Indiana University, Cole taught at the University of Nebraska before joining Cornell's Department of Theatre, Film and Dance in 1968, now the Department of Performing and Media Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Many of the students whom Cole taught and influenced went on to distinguished film, stage and television careers, including:

Christopher Reeve '74; Jimmy Smits, MFA '82; Jane Lynch, MFA '84; Catherine Hicks, MFA '74; William Sadler, MFA '75; Margaret Reed, MFA '81; and Richard Tyson, MFA '85.

“He was a master teacher, dedicated to his students' personal growth as much as their technical training, and he drew many students to the Ithaca campus to study with him,” said his longtime colleague, Bruce Levitt, Professor of Theater.

Another colleague of many years, Richard Archer, moved to Cornell in 1979 after he had spent more than ten years in professional theatre and was amazed at the talent of the MFA acting students he found at Cornell: “I soon learned that this was in no small part due to Steve Cole's amazing ability to audition and choose young, talented students to be in the MFA program. Today, any day on cable and film, you can see a performance by one of Steve's former students.”

Tim Ostrander, who worked with Stephen as a student, designer, actor and colleague, remembers his good humor as he worked “with a bunch of kids who didn't know what they were doing, smiling patiently (through semi-gritted teeth, I believe) as he tried to create a sense of camaraderie among us.”

Twenty years later, working with him as prop master on all his shows and designer for several of them, Ostrander remembers Stephen as always generous with his praise, appreciation and encouragement of Ostrander's creativity.

Cole's time at Cornell was offset by a nine-year disability leave after a failed heart bypass operation in 1987. Following a heart transplant in 1994 and a long recovery, he returned to campus in 1996. "I was very lucky because I was practically dead; I was out of body twice," he said. After decades of using psychological concepts as part of his holistic training of actors, his near-death experience deepened Cole's interest in the inner self, which he connected to a variety of subsequent theatrical pursuits in later life. Kent Goetz, Resident Scene Designer at the Schwartz Center, has many fond memories of collaborating with Stephen as the scene designer on productions he directed during his second stint at Cornell. "Stephen had a distinctive ability to guide his designers with a gentle wisdom that brought out the best in us. I continue to use the productions I did with Stephen in all of my design studio classes as examples of successful collaborations due to the consummate leadership of a seasoned, insightful, caring director. I always felt proud to be part of his creative team."

Cole retired in 2008; in his 40 years at Cornell he built a legacy on campus and in local theater. In the early 1970s he co-founded the Ithaca Repertory Company, which became the Hangar Theatre, and over the years he acted in and directed productions with that company as well as the Kitchen Theatre Company and the Firehouse Theatre. He was active in Compos Mentis, a group of psychologists and volunteers providing cultural and learning activities for people with mental health challenges. He also studied and later taught at the IM School of Healing Arts, a four-year program in healing and spiritual learning based in Ithaca and New York City.

"The IM School," Levitt said, "as well as his vast theater teaching, directing and performing experiences, informed his relationship with the men of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group at Auburn Correctional Facility, an inmate generated theatre group seeking self-knowledge and redemption through theatre. Cole became their first facilitator."

Cole remained active as a facilitator with the Phoenix Players until 2013. Cole's daughter, Paula, an associate professor of theater arts at Ithaca College, also facilitated in the prison program, along with Levitt.

Stephen Cole is survived by his daughters, Paula Murray Cole of Ithaca and Leslie Dixon of Georgetown, Texas.

*Written by Bruce Levitt with contributions from Daniel Aloï, Kent Goetz, Richard Archer and
Tim Ostrander*