



Richard J. Archer

June 8, 1948 – September 14, 2019

Professor Richard J. Archer was born on June 8, 1948 and died September 14, 2019 following a battle with cancer. He graduated with a dual degree in mathematics and economics from Boston College in 1970 and a master's degree in theatre technology from the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1974. Dick was often reserved and never self-promoting, and, as a result, many people didn't realize the extent of Dick's knowledge. But those of us who knew him well relished his capacious mind, rich with brilliance and insights, and his generosity of spirit.

Dick made himself available to colleagues and students alike. When he spoke, his comments were succinct and to the heart of the matter. People listened and learned from Dick's ability to see the root causes. He had a mathematician's penchant for exactness, coupled with an artist's desire to entertain all the possible permutations given the available data. Dick never imposed, but frequently asked questions, and his questions, more often than not, made you understand the problem from a new perspective.

Dick was so succinct, that unless you knew him for a while, you might not realize that he was a "talker" who could entertain you at length telling engaging stories from a lifetime of making theatre with practitioners at the top of the profession. He was a modest but inveterate "people person." Whether it was continuing to be a mentor to former students after they graduated, or assisting a cancer stricken colleague, helping to make his home accessible, Dick's capacity to always use his knowledge and skills for the best, most original outcomes, was unmatched.

"The theatre was a life pursuit for Dick, not just a job. He was quietly excellent for 40 years.", said former student Joey Moro, one of many students who were mentored and nurtured by Professor Archer during his four-decade long career at Cornell. Dick was consistently rated as one of the nation's top technical directors, and the hundreds of people he worked with and for — including the likes of Tom Hanks, Sarah Caldwell, Graciela Daniele, Ruby Dee, Jane Lynch,

John Lithgow, Agnes de Mille and Olympia Dukakis — make up a veritable Who's Who of the American Theatre for the past 50 years.

While Professor Archer served as technical director for nearly 200 productions at Cornell, he spent summers as technical director for some of the nation's finest regional theatres, performing his brand of magic for over 130 productions at the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Opera Company of Boston, Missouri Repertory Theatre, and the Great Lakes Theatre Festival. The sets that he engineered appeared on stages from these locations and were frequently transferred without significant alterations to New York and Broadway: to the Public Theatre and The Roundabout Theatre, as well as The Royal Theatre.

In 1986, Dick began working with long-time friends, Jennifer Shea — who had also known Dick from her work in Cornell's theatre department — and MJ Herson, creating and producing special events for companies and universities. Herson called Professor Archer “our secret ingredient. He took our creative/production team's big, bold abstract ideas and realized them into powerful and exciting theatre experiences. Together we won three C.A.S.E. National Circle of Excellence Awards for multi-billion-dollar campaign events at Princeton University, Cornell University, and Texas A&M. Other Clients included Harvard University, Yale University, Duke University, as well as HBO, Swiss Air, and the inaugural events at the Bass Performance Hall starring Carol Burnett and Van Cliburn.”

Another of Dick's students, and later collaborator with Herson Productions, was Jason Ardizzone-West, now a production and set designer who has worked with Blue Man Group, Julliard Theatre, and The Public Theatre. Most recently, Jason was production designer for *Jesus Christ Superstar* which was broadcast live on NBC. Jason, who had known Dick for 30 years, met him when Jason was an architecture student at Cornell. Jason recalls the first day, sitting at the lunch table in the scene shop with Dick and others, “feeling for the first time at Cornell like I was home. When I met Dick, I started to remember who I was and what I was meant to do. Dick's outward disposition could be gruff and slightly scary to people who didn't know or understand his special kind of genius and warmth. Dick would often say ‘I don't know’ or ‘I don't care’ (with an emphasis on the “I”), but what he was really saying was, ‘I actually know a lot about what you're asking me, I'm excited about it, and I will share it with you if you're interested in it too’. And boy was I interested!”

Ardizzone-West recalls Dick as a “brilliant technical director with a depth of knowledge and interest about theatre that was vast and generous. Always a true mentor to me in school, Dick was always there for me when we started working together at Herson Group and when I switched careers from Architecture to Set Design. Dick Archer was and is a Jedi Master of technical theatre.”

Another former student, as well as a collaborator at times with Herson Group, Sarah Lambert, studied at Cornell when the main theatre for Department productions was in Willard Straight Hall. “The scene shop was a little room backstage. Most Cornell students didn't arrive with a lot of carpentry skills, so Dick basically built every set all by himself. Typically, he would be covered in sawdust and always ready with a memorable comment or two.” Dick was joined in scenery construction by Bill Ashdown, who became a lifelong friend.

Dick was a master persuader, not by dictating a solution, but by gently (and slyly) opening up the possibility that colleagues might want to think more completely about their choices. Sarah Lambert points out that “one of Dick’s best lines was simply – ‘you can build it that way if you want to...’ “This,” says Lambert, “being a not so subtle hint that you should rethink your plan, because it was never going to work. Dick taught his students that it didn’t matter how good a design idea might be in theory, if it couldn’t actually be built – on time and on budget – then it wasn’t a good idea after all.”

Ardizzone-West recalls his favorite example of Dick’s way of giving his advice: “He was constantly sharing his wisdom and knowledge with me, but my favorite example by far is his response to my question about how to get a really beautiful tree made that could also magically bloom onstage. His answer: ‘Only God and Disney can make a tree... however...’ (and then he gave me a whole list of potential fabricators)”.

Professor Archer was instrumental in seeing the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts completed. As Joey Moro recalls: “He shaped the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts building as it is today by completing a mid-construction redesign in order to fit within a suddenly dwindled budget and to save the project.”

Professor Richard Archer’s death leaves a void in the lives of many in the American theatre community. Perhaps Sarah Lambert says it best: “The show will go on, as the saying goes – and life will go on – but it won’t be the same. Not without Dick here. So yes, you can build it that way if you want to... But it won’t ever be as good as how Dick would have built it.”

Professor Archer is survived by his wife, Noreen, daughters Laura and Lisa, and son Chris, as well as his two brothers.

Written by Bruce Levitt, David Feldshuh, and Warren Cross