



IN MEMORIAM

Henry May
Professor of Dramatic Art
Berkeley
1921 — 2002

For nearly 30 years, the settings that theater audiences saw on the University of California, Berkeley campus came from the imagination and the drawing board of Henry May. He had grown up in New York City, and had worked professionally in its theater. While on the faculty of the Department of Dramatic Art at Berkeley (1963-91), he joined with costume designer Warren Travis on well over 100 major drama and dance productions. His *King Lear* closed Wheeler Hall as the chief venue for dramatic performance, and the following year (1968) his *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Eugene O'Neill) opened the newly completed Zellerbach Playhouse. His *L'Histoire du Soldat*, by Stravinsky, with Stravinsky conducting, was part of the program that opened the Zellerbach Hall. For this production, he had also served as architectural consultant.

Henry May came to Berkeley from his position as art director for the CBS television series *Omnibus*. There he had won an Emmy Award for his *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, and a Sylvania Award for his design work on a series hosted by Alistair Cooke. On *Omnibus* he worked with the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Orson Welles, and Leonard Bernstein.

When we single out a distinctly American style in theatrical scene design, Robert Edmond Jones becomes the signature designer of the first half of the twentieth century. After majoring in landscape architecture and serving as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Henry May had studied theater design at the Yale School of Drama under Donald Oenslager, a disciple of Jones. Eventually, collaborating with Jones, May carried the succession into the second half of the twentieth century.

With George House as stage director of a production of *As You Like It*, May created a brilliant white space in Zellerbach Playhouse, a design that won the bronze medal at the Sixth Triennale of Theater Set and Costume Design in the international competition in Yugoslavia. That was in 1981. The competition included work from companies such as the Royal Shakespeare and La Scala. While at Berkeley, he was awarded the first Guggenheim Foundation Award given to a set designer. He also received a Bay Area Theater Critics' Award and a West Coast Theater Critics' Award.

With Berkeley faculty directors, his settings included productions of: *Coriolanus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *Henry VI* (parts I, II, and III), with *Richard III* as *Wars of the Roses*. One season included Chekhov's four great plays: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*; another featured *Don Juan*, with three classical dramas, and a new play, written by faculty director W. I. Oliver; and a third season consisted of three seventeenth century French classics, including Robert W. Goldsby's production of Racine's *Phèdre*, translated by Robert Lowell. Local audiences will remember fondly Henry May's sets for the Old Chestnut Drama Guild, a summer repertory in the Playhouse. David and Marni Wood, lead faculty members of the University Dance Theater, found in May an inspired collaborator. May once said that a set designer has three to five minutes to get his or her points across, after which the setting should recede. That remark, in itself, reveals his special genius for collaboration.

In 1968, Henry May succeeded Travis Bogard as chairman of the Department of Dramatic Art. There, as in his studio, students came to know his gifts as a teacher. As his daughter, Laurie Trippett says: "He was a

visual thinker.” George W. “Skip” Mercier, today a designer with more than 300 plays on and off Broadway, recalls first meeting May. Mercier, an English student at UC Berkeley, accidentally wandered into May’s office one day and found the walls covered with theatrical images. While May sat at a drafting table, absorbed in a task, Mercier says, he pored for an hour over May’s sketches, photographs, and paintings. “At that point,” says Mercier, “I had never seen a professional show, had no idea that a career in the theater was possible. Suddenly I felt the glow of visual magic that made more sense to me than anything before. Over the next few years, Henry carefully taught me skills needed to communicate visual ideas, focused my raw talent, and, most importantly, showed me the possibility of a life in the theater. You know,” Mercier goes on, “he was the happiest man I had ever met, and I dreamed of a life like his. By example, he showed me that being a good designer was in direct proportion to being a good man.”

Former student, Berkeley alumna Julie Weiss says May took particular interest in her work as a costume designer. He encouraged her to go on to graduate school at Brandeis University. Weiss eventually developed a wide- ranging career in theater, TV, and film. She has designed costumes for films such as American Beauty, Steel Magnolias, Searching for Bobby Fisher, and Frida – as well as working at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the Phoenix Theater in New York City, and the San Francisco Opera. She says: “Henry May was about taking creative risks, where one could walk out of the theatre and have a better understanding of the human predicament.” Thinking back to her Berkeley days and to Henry May, she says: “My career is pretty much owed to him, since it was his idea.”

For Berkeley theatergoers, performing arts faculty, and three generations of students, Henry May furnished memorable ideas – visual ideas. He is survived by his sister, Bettina Barasch, his daughter, Laurie May Trippett, and a granddaughter, Holly Trippett.

Robert W. Goldsby
Kathleen Maclay
Dunbar H. Ogden
Warren Travis