

Arthur Holmberg: Memorial Moment
Friday, March 7th, 2025

I'm honored to present this memorial in honor of my colleague and mentor Arthur Holmberg. Arthur passed away peacefully at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts on January 14th, 2025. He was 80 years old.

Arthur was born in the Midwest. His early years were divided between Chicago and a farm in rural Illinois. After graduating from Northwestern University, he earned his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard.

In the late 1970s, Arthur's extraordinary writing skills landed him a job writing about European theater for the *International Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*. One of his assignments was writing about the revival of previously banned plays by Federico Garcia Lorca in post-Franco Spain. He was struck by an unknown charismatic young actor. It was Antonio Banderas.

Arthur's writing caught the eye of Robert Brustein, the founder and artistic director of the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) in Cambridge. Brustein invited Arthur to be a dramaturg in the newly established company. Though interested in performing arts, Arthur had no practical experience with the theater making process. He asked Brustein: "What's a dramaturg?" Fortunately, Brustein still hired Arthur. As the brilliant Literary Director and Dramaturg at the A.R.T., he collaborated with some of the world's most prominent directors, playwrights, and composers, including Robert Wilson, David Mamet, Philip Glass, JoAnne Akalaitis, Andrei Serban, and Anne Bogart.

His six-decade career exemplified a balance of theory and practice, bridging academia and professional theater. He went on to become the author of the books *The Theater of Robert Wilson*, *David Mamet and American Macho*, and *David Mamet and Male Friendship*. He was the U.S. editor of *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theater* and the author of articles for numerous journals and newspapers.

Arthur joined the faculty of Brandeis in the Theater Arts in 1994. He taught undergraduate and graduate courses in dramatic literature and theory, theater and performance history, dramaturgy, playwriting, and film.

Students describe him as "always open and excited to learn from" them and as someone who "made every student feel seen." They remember him as "incredibly supportive and enthusiastic", a "one of a kind" teacher who championed them. They praise his engaging lectures and his humor. Evelyn Inker, a recent graduate shared: "I will do my best to incorporate his lifelong curiosity for art into my spirit."

Susan Swearingen '97, now a scholar and an educator in her own right, wrote: "Losing Arthur has confirmed for me something I've always felt. Professors, our work, is important. We can matter so much in the lives of our students. This is one of the legacies of Arthur in my life, and I'm aware of so many others upon whom he left an enduring legacy."

I am one of these people. I met Arthur 30 years ago when I was in my first year at Brandeis. Taking his course on avant-garde theater changed my life. Arthur inspired me to become a professional theater director and, later, an educator. He made me believe that theater is the most complex and beautiful form of human communication and that a theater maker's capacity for invention is boundless.

Arthur picked up on my artistic ambitions. As a class project, he assigned me to explore unconventional plays by Italian Futurists. I haven't stopped directing since. Arthur mentored me at Brandeis and beyond. He praised my strengths but didn't hold any punches when my work was lacking or was facile. He pushed me to do better.

I understand now that Arthur was not only teaching us about theater, but also preparing us for life in a profound humanistic way. He encouraged us to abandon smug certainties and slogans. The greatest theater, Arthur insisted, depicts human beings as complicated and contradictory.

If the arts defined Arthur's career, they also helped him get through personal tragedies. When his late partner Antonio Cao, a Cuban-American, passed away in 2014, Arthur devoted himself to building a collection of contemporary Cuban art. He became one of the biggest donors of Cuban art to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, dedicating his gifts in his beloved partner's memory.

Arthur's death is not only a loss for this university, it's also a personal one. Arthur was a brilliant intellectual, a mentor and a friend until the end. Once, Arthur mused jokingly that if there's an after-life he hoped his would be a theater festival and a music festival rolled into one. I hope Arthur is enjoying the greatest festival of all.

May his memory be a blessing.