To our Alumni and Friends,

First of all, as we take time in this issue to remember two pioneering luminaries of the Department, Doris Abramson and Vincent Brann, a fixture in the UMass Amherst Department of Theater since its founding. Only three months later we mourned the passing of Professor Emerita Doris Abramson, also among the department’s founders. For this tribute issue of Stages, we invited Brann and Abramson’s colleagues, students, and friends to tell us who they were and what it was like to be here with them.

by Dick Trousdell
Professor Emeritus, Department of Theater

I’m not at all sure that either Vincent or Doris would appreciate me calling them “the elders”—can’t you just hear Doris’s earthy laugh and Vincent’s quick comeback to that? But that is how they seemed to me when I first came to the Department in 1978. After all, they had been here “before”—before the Flood, almost; or as Doris liked to joke, from around the time of Emily Dickinson. But surely, they were here before there was such a thing as a Department of Theater, before there was a Fine Arts Center, before Theater was an respectable area of study separate from English or Speech, and—in Doris’s case—before even UMASS was UMASS, rather than the Massachusetts College of Agriculture. Maybe “Pioneers” would have been a better term, because Vincent and Doris had blazed the trails, fought the good fights, and raised high the banners that made it possible for UMass Amherst Theater to be what it is today. Oh, worthy Pioneers!

They were also a class act, the pair of them. Class as in classy, stylish, high standards, high stepping, the real thing. You could hear it in their gorgeous voices; you could see in their easy bearing, perfectly poised, balanced, and lively without effort. Did I mention diction-to-die for, and skin you wanted to touch? True, all real stars have that sexiness

Vincent Brann and Doris Abramson at a Department gathering

by Mark Dean

Department chairs — a changing of the guard

To our Alumni and Friends,

First of all, as we take time in this issue to remember two pioneering luminaries of the Department, Doris Abramson and Vincent Brann, I want to acknowledge what a privilege it is to be carrying on (even if only indirectly) in their footsteps.

The Department has a rich and expansive history. Most recently it has benefited from the leadership of our former Chair, Harley Erdman. Under his guidance the Department experienced a revision of the undergraduate curriculum, followed by an expansion of the course offerings in the graduate program and an overhaul of the MFA class admissions procedures. In addition, the trails, fought the good fights, and raised high the banners that made it possible for UMass Amherst Theater to be what it is today. Oh, worthy Pioneers!

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Department chairs — a changing of the guard

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Alumni, students, faculty, and staff updates

Personal and professional milestones aplenty again this issue. Thanks to the alumni who sent us updates — we love to hear from you. And if we haven’t, don’t be shy. Let us know how you’re doing!

Alumni

 ■ Faculty member Penny Remsen is on sabbatical this year but emailed us with exciting news about some lighting design alumni: four of the six shows in the Playwrights Horizons season in New York City are being lit by UMass Amherst designers. The list: 100 Saints You Should Know is being done by Jane Cox, as is Doris To Darlene: A Cautionary Valentine, A Feminine Ending will be done by Ben Stanton; and The Drunken City will be designed by Matthew Richards.
 ■ Alan Ball is part of our UMass-Chicago crew, where he has lived for 19 years. He does commercials, industrials, voice-overs, trade shows and live, interactive corporate training, all when time permits and all to pay the bills. Most of his time, though, is spent doing regional theater: In the past year, he played Mr. Bumble in Oliver at the New American Theatre in Illinois, ("Yes, I’m getting older, but they did still have to pad me," he writes), Mordcha in Fiddler on the Roof and Ali Hakim in Oklahoma, both at Theatre at the Center in Indiana, Inspector Goole in An Inspector Calls at Jewish Ensemble Theatre in Michigan, Ben Hecht in Moonlight & Magnolias, Eysichthon and others in Metamorphoses at Nebraska Rep, and Paul in Misery at the Arrow Rock Lyceum in Missouri. He’s currently back in Michigan, playing Vernon in They’re Playing Our Song.
 ■ Christopher Cook wrote in to let us know he’s working as the Director of Arts Education & Outreach Mayor’s Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events in Boston.
 ■ Alumnus Jason Czernich was in a pilot, Flocked, alongside Peter Grosz, writer for The Colbert Report. The pilot screened at The Music Box theater in Chicago in July and placed second as part of The Chicago Comedy TV Pilot Competition. The festival jury included TV executives from ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox in Hollywood, as well as from Comedy Central. Jason recently finished shooting a new pilot he wrote and produced that will be out in mid-2008.
 ■ In the newly released movie The Pirates Who Don’T Do Anything, the voice of Princess Eloise is that of Laura Gerow, Santa Monica, CA. This is the second full-length VeggieTales movie.
 ■ Erin Greene’s Greene Room Productions has been busy across the Pioneer Valley with a production of The Last Five Years, as well as a variety of outreach activities.
 ■ Michelle Hendrick ’94 filled us in on her doings. She currently lives in Hartford with husband Chris Baker who is the Dramaturg for Hartford Stage. They have two children: Hero Marguerite and Raphael Francis. Michelle is an Associate in Opera at The Hartt school of Music at The University of Hartford where she has worked for now 10 years teaching acting to opera students at the undergraduate and graduate level. She also directs operas from time to time ... and acts from time to time with Hartford Stage. In addition, this fall, she took a position as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Trinity College.
 ■ Joan Jubett ’92 was in Kristen Kosmas’s Hello Failure at Performance Space 122 in New York City in March and participated in Under the Radar, the new play festival at the Public in January.
 ■ The first Broadway revival of Stephen Schwartz’s Godspell is scheduled to arrive in New York City this summer and will include the efforts of scenic designer David Korins and lighting designer Ben Stanton.
 ■ Kristen Palmer and her husband Doug let everyone know that they are moving to Ningbo, China to teach at Access International Academy Ningbo. Kristen will be reaching k-12 art.
 ■ Tom Shread was pleased to announce the arrival, in his mailbox, of the brand new publication of House of Wives that he and his wife Carolyn translated in 2000. House of Wives is included in a four-play anthology published by Martin E. Segal Theater Center called Four Plays From North Africa, edited by Marvin Carlson. There are two just production pictures on the inside cover, one from L’institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and the other from our world premiere (directed by Lucinda Kidder) in the Curtain.
 ■ Michael Walker ’81 reports that his mystery, Absolutely Dead, has won second place in the Robert J. Pickering Award for Playwriting Excellence. The play has also been chosen by the WorkShop Theatre Co. in New York for a public reading this spring as part of their “Sundays at Seven” series. Fellow theater alumna Jeanne-Marie Brown directed a reading of Absolutely Dead for Michael in September, 2006 with the following actors (including, in bold, theater students): R.T. Brown, Leland Karr, Matthew Plies, Brent LeRash, Eliza Greene, Alexis Reid, Aimee Kewley, Joel A. Aviles. Michael’s new

If you have an update for us, please e-mail us at umasstheater@theater.umass.edu or amgoossens@verizon.net. You can also call 413.545.3490 or 413.545.6808.

If that doesn’t work for you, send your carrier pigeon to:
Stages
Fine Arts Center 112
151 Presidents Drive
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Amherst, MA 01003

Please include contact information and the year you graduated.

We’ll post your news online at www.umass.edu/theater/depnews.html or run it in the next issue of Stages.

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play, Reflections, has been chosen by Primary Stages in New York for a reading on May 5 as part of their Prime Time Reading Series. It will be directed by Marc Geller.

Faculty

Gina Kaufmann will be assistant director to Tina Packer for the Shakespeare and Company summer production of All's Well That Ends Well.

Department chairs — a changing of the guard

5 new faculty were hired during Harley’s Chairship, bringing a substantive shift in departmental vision and focus on our creative future.

As we move forward, my desire is to build on our fruitful past and uphold our mission to “impart lifelong learning skills in creative problem-solving, effective teamwork, and interpersonal communications.”

Thank you in advance for your continued support of our ongoing efforts.

— Gilbert McCauley

More theater updates

Students

Unplugged, a piece written by undergraduate Jacob Hellman, was selected as part of the Variations Project festival at Run of the Mill Theater in Baltimore.

Graduate directing student Shawn LaCount was pleased to let us know that his company’s production of Mr. Marmalade has been nominated as the season’s best drama by the Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE Awards). He also produced Kirsten Greenidge’s The Gibson Girlthis March at the Boston Center for the Arts. Priscilla Page was the production Dramaturg for the show, an area premiere. They were both heavily involved in the play’s development. He will direct a workshop production of Samuel Beckett’s Happy Days, starring professor Julie Nelson that will go up in May on campus.

It’s a Boy! Miles Matthew McNamara, son of graduate student James McNamara, was born November 27.

A Place Where Lives Are Changed

We’re proud of the role we play in our students’ lives. The opportunity to introduce them to all aspects of theater is something we find thrilling and rewarding. Whether they forge a career in professional theater or go into another line of work, we are proud of the way they represent us.

We also feel a sense of responsibility. Our students trust us to provide them with the best education possible, and we do our level best to live up to that expectation. Your gift to the Department of Theater can help us do that. When you donate, you can help us fund improvements to our facilities. You can help us offer them educational opportunities: guest artists to inspire new creative leaps, support for internships and other special experiences that serve as valuable adjuncts to their learning here in classroom and theater.

Please consider making a contribution to the Department of Theater.

Visit https://www.umass.edu/development/give/ and allocate your gift to theater.

Thank you for your support.
Doris Abramson and Vincent Brann remembered

and know it. They did. They were the Lunt and Fontanne of our scene, and they knew that too. Lunt and Fontanne? Google it.

Most of all, they taught us all by the values they put into action, and not just in their always well-chosen words. Mentors, I suppose we could call them, or models. Consider how Doris stood up, quietly but firmly, to anything or anyone who stood in the way of someone else being all they could be. Her favorite line from Chekhov was “First, you have to endure.” Doris knew all about that. So did Vincent. Consider how Vincent—who knew almost all there was to know about Beethoven’s late quartets—made plain, ordinary, roll-up-your-sleeves work the right and necessary thing to do. He championed undergraduate advising by doing it, and then doing it more (BDIC, CASIAC, what else have you got?). He supported public radio by helping start one (WFCR), made theater happen by helping build one or two (the Fine Art Center, the Shea in Turners Falls), and made life itself seem generous, intelligent, and fun right up to the not-always-nice end. The last time I saw him was at a party: he was having a marvelous time.

So, like the graceful pair they were, they timed their exits to go in sequence, the one shortly after the other. Doris made her last public appearance at Vincent’s memorial service. Although very ill herself, she refused a microphone—none of that for her friend and chamber theater pro, Vincent!—took a deep, supported breath, and spoke three short Emily Dickinson poems with that subtle clarity that was her signature. And of course there was a real piano, a real singer, a real song—“Let’s Face the Music and Dance”—and some real drinks after. Elders? You’ve got to be kidding.

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by John Saltonstall ’79
President, Copper Creek Studios

Vincent Brann was the first person I met in the department during my summer orientation. He was a kind soul in a sea of nervous pubescent kids trying to figure out what they were going to do in this old Agricultural School in Western Massachusetts. During my tenure in the department he could always be counted on for a kind word of encouragement at just the right time – usually the end of an 80 hour tech week. A true gentleman at all times, he was always the class of the Theater Department.

Doris Abramson tried to teach me to sing and failed miserably. That being said, she did teach me how to feel a play. She taught me about words and their importance. She taught me about “regionalisms” and where we all fit into the grand scheme of things. Mostly she could be counted on to provide just the right observation about someone or something that seem to cut through all the crap and get right to the heart of the matter. The Grande Dame of the Theater Department … always and forever.
Being From —

by Virginia Scott,
Professor Emerita

I always envied Doris being a native New Englander, but I remember being slightly shocked one day when she said that she going to Minneapolis to do something—speak? get an award?—at The Foot of the Mountain, a famous women's theatre, that she'd never been to the Midwest before, and that the thought of it was unnerving her. A native Midwesterner myself, I couldn't imagine what about the Midwest was making her nervous (although now I rather think she was pulling my leg). I personally felt somewhat in awe of people who were actually born to white Congregational churches and town meetings and strawberry suppers. To say nothing of people who were still living where they were born.

Now, Vincent was different. He was from Iowa, one state to the north of mine, and we both went to the University of Iowa. It's not always easy being from Iowa or having gone to that University. People get confused. And no, the University of Iowa is not the place with the cows and the pigs. That's Iowa State University. It was even worse when Vincent and I went there. In those days it was the State University of Iowa, so there was ISU and SUI (just sound that out). And then there's the Ohio problem. I once said to a group in France that I had gone to the University of EE-OH-WA. "Ah, oui," someone replied. "OH-HEE-OH." "Non, non," said I, "EE-OH-WA." And so on. But Vincent had had a terrific time at SUI and so had I, and we liked to talk about it.

Now, people from New England have standards, and Doris had them. My first encounter with Doris Abramson was as a newspaper reporter for the Daily Hampshire Gazette a good ten years ago. I was doing a story about famous people who'd passed through the Pioneer Valley and someone told me she'd known Bill Pullman and Richard Gere during their time here, so I gave her a call, and she entertained my questions graciously. I can't tell stories the way she can — don't have that voice — but I remember one she told me that got a laugh of "Yes, that's Doris" recognition when I repeated it to a former colleague of hers a while back: In the late 1970s, faculty and graduate students were asked to run the department box office, and the time came for Doris and Bill to do their shift. Bill worried because he wasn't sure exactly what they were supposed to do. Doris confessed that she didn't know either, but arrived soon enough at an inspired solution: "We'll ACT box office!"

— Anna-Maria Goossens, Public Relations Director


And a bad back that got her out of lots of second acts. But Midwesterners are not slouches. Vincent once caught me spelling "accommodate" with one "m," and I think he wanted to bump me down a rank for it. And then there was the time I used Purcell for intermission music in a seventeenth-century French play. Oh, dear.

I don't know if being from Amherst, Massachusetts, or being from Davenport, Iowa, had anything to do with it, but both Vincent and Doris had wonderful speaking voices, clear and melodious, and well-placed. I loved listening to them and especially to Vincent on the radio. And they had PRESENCE. I never saw Doris act, although I suspect she was good, and I don't know that Vincent ever did act, but both of them could turn a classroom into a theatre, a very useful talent in a theatre department. (And, incidentally, I'm spelling that t-h-e-a-t-e-r, and yes, that's the French spelling, and it was VCB who insisted on t-h-e-a-t-e-r, if you want to know, so take that, Vincent!)

It was a lot of fun to go to a play or a concert and ... “Look, here comes Doris!” “Hey, there’s Vincent.” Or to remember to freeze the vodka bottle, because Doris was coming to the party. Or to call Vincent and see if he'd like to run down to BAM and see a Lulli opera. New England, Iowa, in the long run, whatever made them what they were, they were two wonderful colleagues and friends and I’ll never stop missing them.
Amor Vincit Omnia

by Joanne (Drexler) Garland ’69

Vincent Brann brought gentleness and precision to his work in theater. Ever the professional, he taught each cast and crew to work seamlessly together. The level of discipline that he demanded made for a tight performance that brought satisfaction and pride to us all.

Once during the summer of 1966, when the University Theatre occupied Bartlett Auditorium and produced three plays in repertory, he invited our entire summer company to his home for dinner. There he became a generous and gracious host. I knew him as that host, as well as one of our directors.

The following semester I enrolled in his oral interpretation class, believing that reading aloud from a lectern would be a piece of cake. Not so! In the classroom Vincent demanded that we slow way, way down, think about what we were reading, and deliver our words with care and precision. He made us work hard, and he raised us to a level of skill that we hadn't known was possible. That hard-won skill has served me well in many settings over the years.

Those years appeared to have been kind to Vincent, who never seemed to age. I once ran into him in Greenfield as we entered a grocery store at the same time. “Vincent Brann,” I said, startling him, “I was one of your students in the sixties.” I never expected him to remember me, and he didn’t. Nevertheless, he responded with all of the grace and professionalism that I remembered.

A prop for one of our plays in 1966 was a piece of embroidery that spelled out in Latin, AMOR VINCIT OMNIA. “What does that mean, anyway?” one cast member asked during rehearsal.

Someone else couldn’t resist. With a playful glance toward our director, she proposed the perfect translation: “Love Vincent forever.”

So be it.

by Andrew Lichtenberg ’81G

I knew Vincent Brann well when I was studying Directing at the UMass/Amherst Theatre Dept. I never took any courses from Vincent or worked on any performance projects with him, but by being around the department, I came to know Vincent well — his quick wit, his sharp judgement(s), his love of opera and the vocal life of any performance. Once I knew how Vincent felt about anything produced in our department, I had a way to gauge its worth — I felt that he and Doris Abramson were the quality compass of all our work. That and the fact that he was always fun to be around; you were always going to get a laugh and a good story from Vincent.

By 1989, after working in college and professional theater in Philadelphia, I was back in the Pioneer Valley as the Project Manager for the Shea Theatre renovation in Turners Falls. The Town of Montague wanted to renovate the old, abandoned, dilapidated 70 year old theatre building and create a home from community theatres and for concerts in Franklin County. I had inherited the job from a fellow and fellow UMass alum Jay DiPucchio. After about a year, we were still slogging through fund-raising, program planning and board development. Suddenly, we had a “crisis” within our board, with half of the members leaving and a dangerous gap in leadership emerging. I though of Vincent right away. He had recently retired. I knew he had the qualities we would need. He did accept the challenge and with his fine leadership the board re-formed and got back to work. With a new sense of purpose and organization and under Vincent’s steady hand at the helm, we finished the seemingly impossible fund raising and completed the miracle of the Shea’s renovation. Since its reopening in October 1990, the Shea has been filled with community theatre performances, concerts, classes, and countless other performance activities.

My wife Debora (MFA Dramaturgy ’81 and VMD -veterinary doctor- UPenn ’88) and I continued our friendship with Vincent until his passing late last year. When he and I saw each other socially, we always shared some stories and many laughs about our adventures at UMass and the Shea Theatre. As our sons grew up, both with strong interest in the theatre, they too enjoyed talking with Vincent and his friend Stanley Tripp at the many Christmas parties in our home. For thirty years, as professor, colleague and valued friend, Vincent was an treasured part of our life.
Encouraging an avocation

by Marty Norden
Professor of Communication

I was fortunate to have worked with Vincent and Doris during the mid-1980s, and my life is richer for it. They were warm, generous, and caring theater folk, and they had that quality that every actor looks for in a director: faith. They had faith in me. As a newly tenured Communication professor who hadn't “done” theater in many years when I first met them during auditions, I grew to treasure that faith.

In 1984, Vincent was planning to direct a chamber-theater production called Porcupines at the University, to be performed in the Curtain. I auditioned and was thrilled that he cast me as a member of the eight-person ensemble. I was nervous and not terribly confident, but he allayed my fears and encouraged me to do my best. Porcupines was a low-tech affair with only three performances (it was squeezed between two other Curtain productions at a time when the department mounted two Rands and two Curtains every semester), but it was the perfect transition back to a world I hadn't really explored since my undergrad days. Vincent was wonderful at facilitating that process for me.

The following year, Doris cast me as the Husband in Machinal. It represented a major step forward in my modest acting career: a substantial role in a fully mounted production. Doris showed that same faith in me that Vincent had, and it's something for which I will always be grateful. During our time together on that quirky little show, I discovered her to be a kind and loving person with a wicked sense of humor beneath that dignified exterior.

If I'm not mistaken, Porcupines and Machinal were the last shows that Vincent and Doris directed for the department. [True, according to our records — ed.] Needless to say, I am honored to have been a part of those productions. I've acted in about thirty shows since then, and I trace this lengthy avocation back to the generosity and encouragement that Vincent and Doris showed me so many years ago. I credit them with reopening the door to theater for me. I miss the reassuring markers of their presence in the audience—Vincent's distinctive head of white hair, Doris's never-to-be-forgotten deep-throated laugh—but I know they're up in that magical “fly space” above the Rand and, I hope, looking down with fondness.

by Denise Wagner
Department Secretary

My memories are not about plays that I've seen, or any mutual projects worked on, but rather of many, many brief phone conversations and encounters from over a decade and a half: Routine messages passed along whenever anyone called wanting to speak to Vincent or Doris. I weighed whether or not they were worthy of interrupting retirement days, as I have done for anyone who has joined those ranks, and always welcomed those happenstances when it was MY JOB to GET to call them.

Their voices alone were indicators of the humble brilliance that was there and that greeted me with warm familiarity. And, how sweet it was when occasions gifted me the chance to see them in person.

The loss of Vincent and Doris will burn for quite some time to come.
A benefit for the UMass Amherst Department of Theater

Come fall, UMass Amherst Professor of Theater Julian Olf will find himself in such august company as Seamus Heaney, T.S. Eliot, and Wendy Wasserstein. One of his plays, (PEOPLE ALMOST ALWAYS SMELL GOOD IN THE ART MUSEUM), has been selected for publication in the Massachusetts Review, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary next year. Olf’s piece will appear in the fall 2008 issue. Although his work regularly receives productions away from home, the benefit performances this spring represent the first time Olf has made his work available to the University community. For the occasion, he has chosen two short plays, UNAIRED PUBLIC RADIO SEGMENT and (PEOPLE ALMOST ALWAYS SMELL GOOD IN THE ART MUSEUM). The former is an edgy satire on the voyeurism and packaging of violence by the media, while the latter piece, for solo performer, is set in a crowded tavern where, over the course of a few beers, a man attempts to communicate his perceptions of life, art, dogs and snails to a pal who sees things differently. While proofing the publication galleys aloud, Olf felt an irresistible urge to inhabit the character of his creation. Hence, in addition to comprising the first production of the finished play, the department’s spring production marks Olf’s first public appearance as an actor since his work in New York City’s LaMama nearly forty years ago.

Performances will be May 16 and 17 at 8 p.m. in the Curtain Theater
Admission price is a suggested donation of $20, $10 for students/seniors
Proceeds of the May 16 event will benefit the Massachusetts Review;
proceeds of the May 17 event will benefit the Department of Theater.
Audience members are invited to a post-show reception following each performance.