

December 10, 2012 | By Judy Piercey

Wagners Donate \$2.2 Million to UC San Diego's Student Production Fund

Inaugural department chair Arthur Wagner and his wife, Molli, give to ensure the show goes on



Arthur Wagner

After an academic theater career that spanned nearly 40 years, Arthur Wagner—founding chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego—is still passionate about training the next generation of theater and dance artists. As a result of budgetary cuts at the University of California, funds for student productions have all but dried up. Concerned that professional training opportunities are vanishing because of shrinking budgets, today Wagner and his wife, Molli, announced a lead gift of \$2.2 million to endow the UC San Diego Division of Arts and Humanities' Student Production Fund.

Student productions in the division's Theatre and Dance department are integrally tied to curriculum: Hands-on, collaborative work provides a fertile environment for students to make significant contributions on all aspects of a production, from lighting and sound design to acting, dance, directing and choreography. UC San Diego, in a unique and dynamic partnership with the La Jolla Playhouse, creates a vibrant, integrated environment for students.

"It is time to launch a fundraising effort that will sustain the future quality of theater at UC San Diego, one of the top programs in the nation," said Wagner, professor emeritus. "We need to ensure that the show goes on for students. Thanks to their experience in student productions and the training they receive, our alumni make significant contributions in film, television, Broadway, off-Broadway and at major regional theaters."

Photo by Jim Carmody, UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance

In addition to providing the lead gift, the Wagners have also agreed to be co-chairs of the Student Production Fund initiative that seeks to generate a \$7 million endowment in support for student performances that clearly differentiate UC San Diego's theater and dance program. Private support is



critically needed to help continue the valuable training experience students need, including funding actual productions and associated program expenses. In recognition of the generosity of Arthur and Molli Wagner, the campus has renamed its annual new play festival the Wagner New Play Festival, which each spring produces plays written by students in the MFA playwriting program.

“Faculty and students alike are thrilled by Arthur and Molli’s incredibly generous gift,” said Jim Carmody, chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance. “Even though Arthur has been an emeritus professor for some time, every one of us knows the Wagners well. When they’re in San Diego, they never miss a production. The Wagner energy, joy and commitment to the art inspire us all, and we couldn’t be more delighted to have their name on one of our signature annual events—the Wagner New Play Festival. We are profoundly grateful for their support and for chairing the Student Production Fund initiative.”

This year, the UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance celebrates the 40th anniversary of its founding with exciting work that has become the hallmark of the campus and the community. The season runs Nov. 14 through Apr. 27, and features seven American plays, including four new productions, as well as rarely seen classics by Shakespeare and Pirandello. There will also be a dance theater thesis work

Photo by Jim Carmody, UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance

directed by third year MFA student, Anya Cloud, and “*winterWORKS*,” highlighting the unique talents of students in new works by faculty choreographers and MFA dance theater candidates. Each season begins with a new group of MFA students, with performances that take place at intimate venues within the UC San Diego Theatre District.



Wagner added, “Contemporary theater—it’s visual, it’s digital. Our students have to keep up with the times. To find work within theater, you have to be able to do these things. So there is an urgency to raise money for the Student Production Fund. The bulk of our graduate theater program is in performance, training actors, directors, playwrights, stage managers, designers and choreographers. We have the most incredible facilities. They shouldn’t sit empty for lack of funding for student productions.”

The UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance alumni are nationally known for their talent and impact. Tony Award winning actor Jefferson Mays (*I Am My Own Wife*), three-time Tony nominee Danny Burstein (*The Drowsy Chaperone*, *South Pacific*, *Follies*), Emmy award-winning writer Rachel Axler (*The Daily Show*, *Parks & Recreation*), former Playhouse artistic director Michael Greif (*Rent*), scenic designer Robert Brill (*The Wiz*, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*), New York-based choreographer Monica Bill Barnes (*Monica Bill Barnes & Company*), Obie award winner Tom Nelis (*The Medium*) and recent graduate Paloma Young (*Peter and the Starcatcher*) are just a few of the many theater professionals who received the foundation for their careers at UC San Diego.



n Carmody, UC San Diego Department of Theatre and

“It’s no exaggeration to say that I would not have a Tony Award sitting above my desk right now had I chosen to train elsewhere,” said Paloma Young, a theater alumna who has worked on a range of productions since graduating with an MFA degree in 2006. She earned a Tony for costume design for “*Peter and the Starcatcher*” earlier this year.

Actor Jefferson Mays, a two-time Obie Award winner known for his outstanding stage work, earned his MFA degree in 1991. “The only real way to practice the craft of acting is by doing plays,” he said. “I don’t know of any other MFA training program in the country that gives its students the performance opportunities I had at UC San Diego.”

Molli and Arthur Wagner are longtime supporters of UC San Diego’s Theatre and Dance department. In addition to their generous “Theatre and Dance Student Productions Endowed Fund,” over the years the couple has also funded *The Arthur and Molli Wagner Chair in Acting*, *The Molli and Arthur Wagner*

Dance Building and a graduate fellowship in acting to support deserving young artists. In addition, the Arthur Wagner Theatre on campus was named in recognition of Wagner's longtime service and support of the arts at UC San Diego.

"It has been our true life's passion to build and to nurture Theatre and Dance at UC San Diego," said Wagner. "The result of this labor of love is a program that has been one of the top-ranked in the country since its inception; a program that is at once imaginative, eclectic and interdisciplinary."

UC San Diego's Department of Theatre and Dance is considered one of the nation's premier theater training programs, offering MFA degrees in acting, design, directing, playwriting, stage management and the new areas of dance theater and sound design, as well as a Ph.D. in theater. For department information, visit theatre.ucsd.edu. To support the Student Production Fund initiative, please visit our secure online giving [site](#).

UC San Diego's [Studio Ten 300](#) offers radio and television connections for media interviews with our faculty, which can be coordinated via studio@ucsd.edu. To connect with a UC San Diego faculty expert on relevant issues and trending news stories, visit <https://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/media-resources/faculty-experts>.

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