

September 21, 2015 | By Cynthia Dillon and Jade Griffin

## Arthur Wagner, Founding Chair of UC San Diego Theatre and Dance, Dies



*Arthur and Mollie Wagner; UC San Diego*

Arthur Wagner, founding chair of the University of California, San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance and philanthropist of the arts, has died. He was 92.

Wagner was recruited to UC San Diego to become chair of the campus's fledgling Department of Drama in 1972. Under his guidance, the department grew from an undergraduate program with a dozen students to one of the top three theater and dance programs in the nation. Today, the Department of Theatre and Dance includes more than 300 students, and offers master of fine arts degrees

in acting, dance theatre, design, directing, playwriting and stage management, as well as a doctoral degree program. In recognition of Wagner's longtime service and support of the arts at UC San Diego, the Arthur Wagner Theatre on campus is named in his honor. In 2013, he, and his wife, Mollie, received the prestigious Chancellor's Medal, the highest honor given by the campus to recognize exceptional service in support of UC San Diego's mission.

"Arthur was a friend and long-time supporter of UC San Diego, and it was my distinct privilege to honor him with the Chancellor's Medal," said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. "It is because of his leadership, creativity and zeal that UC San Diego is now home to one of the top three graduate theater programs in the nation. Arthur was an inspirational visionary whose impact will live on for generations, and he will be greatly missed."

A gifted professional actor and director, Wagner had numerous directing and acting credits. He was still performing on stage at UC San Diego in 2012. Many of



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Wagner's students went on to Hollywood and Broadway success, earning top accolades, including Tony and Emmy awards.

Jim Carmody, chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance on campus, gratefully acknowledges Arthur Wagner not only as the department's founding chair, but as its greatest benefactor. "His most enduring gift is his vision of a department that provided training in all of the disciplines of the theater."

Carmody explained that although Wagner taught in the M.F.A. acting program, he equally supported M.F.A. programs in dance, design, directing, playwriting and stage management, as well as the Ph.D. program.

"Arthur and Molli came to see every single production when they were in town," recalled Carmody. "Arthur kept in touch with a great number of alumni and saw their work whenever possible. He remained a mentor to generations of students long after they graduated. He also generously advised all the department chairs who succeeded him, and his counsel was invaluable. We will miss him greatly in our studios, in our theaters and in our faculty meetings."

Though Wagner officially retired as a professor from UC San Diego in 1991 he remained deeply involved with the campus, teaching and mentoring students, attending faculty meetings and providing guidance and support for the arts at UC San Diego.

"Arthur's was also the vision that helped bring the revived La Jolla Playhouse to the campus," said Carmody. "He fostered a strong relationship between the department and the playhouse that has grown, and he took great delight in seeing them both achieve stellar national reputations."

Arthur and Molli Wagner showed great generosity in enhancing the vision of UC San Diego's Division of Arts and Humanities with charitable gifts. In 2012, the couple established the *Theatre and Dance Student Productions Endowed Fund* with a lead gift of \$2.2 million. The Wagners also served as co-chairs of the Student Production Fund Endowment, which seeks to provide continued funding for student productions, despite state budget cuts. The couple contributed to the Molli and Arthur Wagner Dance Building, the Arthur Wagner Theatre, the *Wagner Endowed Graduate Acting Fellowship* and the *Arthur and Molli Wagner Endowed Chair in Acting*—the only one of its kind in the nation. In recognition of the Wagners' generosity, the campus also renamed the Wagner New Play Festival in their honor.

"Arthur Wagner's exemplary commitment to the Arts and Humanities at UC San Diego, supported by his wife Molli, manifested through their great generosity in time, talent and treasure to our division. We are forever grateful for his profound impact, and we will miss him dearly," shared Division of Arts and Humanities Dean Cristina Della Coletta.

Together with Molli, Arthur Wagner also supported ArtPower!, scholarships and The Preuss School UCSD. He was a member of the UC San Diego Chancellor's Associates and Friends of the Stuart Collection. Wagner also served on the board of trustees of the La Jolla Playhouse from 2001 until his death. He also was a member of Actors' Equity Association.

Arthur Wagner was born in New York City on May 11, 1923. He earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., in 1946 and a master's degree in theater arts from Smith College in Northampton, Mass. Wagner served as supervisor of dramatic activities at the Jewish Community Center in Springfield, Mass., from 1948 to 1949, and as artistic director at the Springfield Civic Theatre from 1949 to 1950. He went on to study with the famed actor Paul Mann at the Actors Workshop in New York City from 1953 to 1955. Wagner was named head of the theatre arts department and director of the Annie Russell Theatre at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., in 1956 and held the position for nine years while earning his doctorate in drama from Stanford University in 1962.

From 1965 to 1967 he served as professor of drama at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he established the Graduate Actor Training Program. He spent two years as a professor and director of graduate and undergraduate actor training programs at Ohio University before moving to Temple University in Philadelphia. After serving for three years as professor of drama and director of the Graduate Actor Training Program at Temple University, Wagner joined the UC San Diego faculty in 1972.

Arthur Wagner is survived by his wife of 59 years, Molli; their son, Wayne Wagner; daughter-in-law, Mary Kies Wagner and granddaughter Kendra Wagner.

A memorial event is being planned for Oct. 12 at La Jolla Playhouse's Mandell Weiss Theatre, with reception to follow at the Molli and Arthur Wagner Dance Building. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests contributions in his memory be made to the Theatre and Dance Student Productions Endowment, which was established by the Wagners to ensure that "the show goes on" for UC San Diego students. Donations can be made online by visiting [theatre.ucsd.edu/SPF](https://theatre.ucsd.edu/SPF) and clicking "Give Now." Checks can also be made payable to the UC San Diego Foundation in Wagner's honor, with "Theatre & Dance Student Productions Endowment (4640)" in the memo, and mailed to 9500 Gilman Drive, #0940, La Jolla, CA 92093-0940.

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## MEDIA CONTACT

**Cynthia Dillon**, 858-822-6673, [cdillon@ucsd.edu](mailto:cdillon@ucsd.edu)

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