

UC San Diego Celebrates Wagner's 90 Years and Department's Four Decades of Theatrical Education

True to form, Arthur Wagner stole the spotlight at celebration of his 90th birthday at the Mandell Weiss Forum Theatre, where a crowd gathered to both pay tribute to a grandfather of theater at UC San Diego and to celebrate the department's 40 years of educating theater professionals.



Arthur Wagner

Wagner was recruited to become chair of the fledgling department of theatre and dance in 1972. Under his guidance, the department grew from an undergrad program with a faculty of three, to a department with more than 30 faculty, master of fine arts degrees in acting, dance theatre, design, directing, playwriting and stage management, as well as a doctoral degree program.

The Wagner celebration included an outdoor reception held May 18 with birthday cake and a formal tribute inside the Weiss Theatre, with remarks from faculty, alumni and students. A group of acting students also serenaded Wagner with lyrics such as “You’re sublime, you’re a turkey dinner” and “You’re the first light of a summer night.”

“It’s Arthur’s halo, not the lights, that are blinding me,” said Seth Lerer, dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities at UC San Diego. He emphasized Wagner’s vision and leadership, and recalled that he and Wagner both attended [not together] the same Jewish summer camp. “As they get older, all Jewish men look alike,” Lerer joked, “and I take comfort that one day even if I can’t do as much, I will at least look like him.”

Zoë Chao, the 2011 recipient of a graduate acting fellowship endowed by the Arthur and Molli Wagner, called the Wagners “the hippest couple you have ever laid eyes on,” and said of Wagner that “you could fill Texas with the amount of people you taught.”

Actress, faculty member and alumna Eva Barnes credited Wagner – a seasoned actor revered by past and present acting students – with encouraging her to take risks: “He told us to make ‘juicy’ choices.”

William Hodgson, current Wagner acting fellow, said that “I wouldn’t be here without the Wagners’ generosity. Arthur is the heart of this department and I don’t think that will change anytime soon.”

Michael Rosenberg, managing director of La Jolla Playhouse, credited Wagner for his part in developing first-class theater venues at UC San Diego that are shared by the playhouse and by the department of theatre and dance. In turn, Wagner praised La Jolla Playhouse for its close relationship with the department. Students often work on playhouse productions, and they can also attend Broadway-bound plays as part of their education.



Photo by Jim Carmody / UC San Diego Department of The Dance

During the outdoor reception, many sang Wagner’s praises.

“Arthur’s scene-study class was a great education,” said Frank Collison (’78). Collison has appeared in the movies “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” “Hitchcock,” and many more, as well as such television series as “Good Luck Charlie,” “Eagleheart” and “My Name Is Earl.”

“There was an actress and in the scene, she was sweeping but she hadn’t really swept anything up. So, at the end of the scene, Arthur gestured to her and asked for the broom. He took the broom from her and spent about 45 seconds really sweeping and he actually accumulated a pile of dust. He looked down at the dust and he handed the actress the broom and he said, ‘When you sweep – sweep!’ And ever since then I’ve told that story in acting classes and told actors who are indicating or just acting something but not really doing it, ‘When you sweep – sweep!’”

Meanwhile, as the tribute’s final speaker, Wagner proved that he is still a masterful performer. His remarks elicited raucous laughter, somber moments and, ultimately, a standing ovation.

“I was offered the chairmanship at both UC Riverside and here,” he said. “My children said, ‘We will go to La Jolla’ – what the heck did they know about La Jolla – ‘but we won’t go to Riverside’. They knew about Riverside, it was the smog belt of the world.”

Noting that “no one person makes the department,” Wagner credited many players, including Floyd Gaffney and Eric Christmas, faculty who were at UC San Diego when Wagner arrived, and a few of the many faculty who sustained the department including Dan Dryden, Michael Addison, Jorge Huerta, Frantisek Deak and current department Chair Jim Carmody.

“Molli’s advice to me today was to be very short,” Wagner said when he first stepped to the podium. “And then I thought, the next celebration like this will be the 50th anniversary of the department and I better take my chances while I can.”

To read more about the history of the UC San Diego department of theatre and dance, see the Triton alumni magazine story, “[Four Dramatic Decades](#).”

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