

Adele E. Shank, Developer of UC San Diego's Playwriting Program, Dies

Playwright Adele Edling Shank, who developed and led UC San Diego's playwriting program, died Nov. 27 in San Diego. She was 74.

Pioneer of a style of theatrical writing called hyper-realism, Shank brought the same innovative spirit to her teaching. She joined the UC San Diego faculty in 1981 as a lecturer, when the department was still called the department of drama, and became permanent faculty in 1984. Shank served as chair from 1989 to 1992, years that saw considerable growth in the department. She was also instrumental in seeing that the department became the department of theatre and dance.

In 2010, she and her husband, Theodore Shank, also a distinguished professor emeritus in the UC San Diego department of theatre and dance, made a generous gift to establish the Adele and Theodore Shank Professional Playwriting Residency Award. The fund supports graduating MFA student recipients in playwriting residencies at recognized and renowned theaters across the country. In appreciation of their generous philanthropy, the former Forum Studio at UC San Diego was renamed the Theodore and Adele Shank Theatre.

Many of Shank's students have gone on to successful careers in theater, film and television, as well as in academia, including Naomi Iizuka ('92), who is now directing the UC San Diego playwriting program her mentor built.

Shank's work as a playwright was equally significant – pioneering a style of writing that was inspired, she said, by such hyper-real painters as Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes. Her plays were produced nationally and in England, and often involved collaboration with her husband, who directed most of the premieres.



Adele Shank, pictured at about the time she joined the UC San Diego faculty in the 1980s.

Her acclaimed six-part California series included “Sunset/Sunrise,” “Winterplay,” “Stuck: A Freeway Comedy,” “Sand Castles,” “The Grass House,” and “Tumbleweed.” The California series followed the lives of a quirky suburban family. “Winterplay” was produced by Second Stage in New York City in 1983. Given today’s digitized millennial generation, Shank’s portrayal of teenage daughter Anne seems prescient: Anne rarely leaves her bedroom and makes evangelical pronouncements to her family and to the audience via closed-circuit video.

Other plays include “War Horses,” “Rocks in Her Pocket,” “With Allison’s Eyes,” “The Wives of the Magi” (an ecumenical play for December) and “Sex Slaves.” Shank’s “Dry Smoke” was a chamber opera with music by Victor Kioulaphides, produced by the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra. Shank wrote the text for a dance theater piece “Jardin Blanc,” with English choreographer and UC San Diego dance faculty member Yolande Snaith and the Yolande Snaith Dance Company. The production premiered in Brighton, England in 2004 and toured England with a performance at the annual Dance Umbrella festival. An American production followed.

Shank’s adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse,” with music by composer and UC San Diego alumnus Paul Drescher, directed by Les Waters, opened at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2007.

Her plays were also workshopped and produced at the La Jolla Playhouse, the Magic Theatre (San Francisco), Los Angeles Theatre Center and the Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kentucky, among many others nationally and abroad.

Shank was the recipient of, among other awards, a National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship, Rockefeller Playwrights-in-Residence Grant and a Dramatists Guild/CBS Award.

Shank also played a major part in creating UC San Diego’s Wagner New Play Festival – an annual showcase for emerging playwrights at UC San Diego – over the years mentoring playwrights, welcoming theater professionals from around the country and hosting events at her home. She and her husband were also co-founders in 1991 of the international journal TheatreForum. Following her retirement in 2005, she continued to teach in the department and to serve as editor of TheatreForum.

Adele Shank was born in Litchfield, Minnesota on April 9, 1940. She grew up on a farm 50 miles west of Minneapolis as well as in Sacramento. Shank attended UC Davis where she supported herself through school. She is survived by her beloved husband, Theodore; their daughter, Kendra Shank, a jazz singer; their son, Stan Shank, a computer assisted designer and engineer; and her sister, Susan Edling, an attorney in Sacramento.

In lieu of flowers, the Shank family suggests contributions in Adele Shank’s memory be made to TheatreForum. Donations can be made online at giveto.ucsd.edu; please type “4719” or “TheatreForum” in the search field. Checks can also be made payable to the UC San Diego Foundation, with “TheatreForum 4719” in the memo, and mailed to 9500 Gilman Drive, #0940, La Jolla, CA 92093-0940.

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