



George and Eleanor
Woodyard, Latin American
Theatre Today Conference

George Woodyard, 1934-2010

*Y cuando te hayas consolado
(uno siempre se consuela)
te sentirás contento de haberme conocido.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

The empty screen is always daunting, but never so daunting as when faced with the piece that I never wanted to have to write. On November 7, 2010, after nearly four years of silently battling cancer, George Woodyard peacefully departed on his final trip, leaving all of us wondering how to say farewell to the man who founded this journal, who produced the next generation of Latin American theatre scholars and *aficionados*, who put Latin American theatre on the world map, and who selflessly served his students, colleagues, and the Lawrence community.

In 1997 we organized an homage and dedicated a special issue of the *Latin American Theatre Review* to George as part of the III Latin American Theatre Today conference. Ever humble, George was mortified to see us acting as if he had already died, and on his own soil to boot. Now, thirteen years later, George is not in Kansas anymore, but rather enjoying a quiet moment in the LATT in the sky, and it is finally time to express openly our thanks and admiration for a man who had a remarkable and indelible impact on the field of Latin American theatre and on all of the students, colleagues, and theatre practitioners, both here and abroad, who found in him a source of inspiration, support and good humor.

Born in 1934 in Charleston, Illinois, George Woodyard was the youngest of nine children. A true *wunderkind*, he was reading and writing by

the time he set off for kindergarten in a one-room schoolhouse. He finished high school at the age of 15 and just five years later had a Masters degree and a position teaching high-school Spanish in Illinois. After an Army stint that involved teaching English in Puerto Rico, George returned to school, earning his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1966. In 1967, just one year after arriving at the University of Kansas, he founded the *Latin American Theatre Review*, which he directed for more than forty years. Throughout those years he taught, published, edited the journal, and traveled extensively. Always up for new challenges, he also served in increasingly larger administrative capacities as Dean of the Graduate School, Associate Vice Chancellor of Research, Graduate Studies, and Public Service; Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and Dean of International Studies.

George was a shaker and a mover. He walked fast, talked fast, and thought fast. Never prone to basking in his achievements, he was ever eager to initiate new projects, whether it be a book, a conference, a press, an arboretum, a community theatre, or a Lawrence summer camp for his eight grandchildren. Somehow he found time to do this and more, and he did it all with grace, modesty and a smile. He was a relentless e-mailer, never dodging the opportunity to help someone near or far. As Sandy Cypess explains, “I would often write in alarm asking for help, guidance, wisdom — and he was always ready to offer suggestions — even if he said ‘what do I know?’ Well, George knew a lot.”

The epitome of selflessness, George was always more interested in helping others than in building his own resumé, which is, nonetheless, a monument of scholarly production.¹ During the past 45 years, he edited nearly 20 books, provided more than 15 chapters to edited volumes, published more than 70 articles, prologues, and reviews, and delivered well over 120 papers and talks. He *was* Latin American theatre, a reputation officially recognized through several awards including the Ollantay Prize (1979), two Fulbright fellowships (1987, 1995), the Premio Armando Discépolo for Theatre Research (1995), the Teatro Avante Life-Time Achievement Award (2000) and the Premio de Teatro Latinoamericano George Woodyard, established in 2005.

Between 1974 and 2005, George was dissertation director for 16 Ph.D. students, while serving on the committees of many others. Even those who never studied at KU acknowledge George’s influence on their career. Sharon Magnarelli explains, “I wasn’t privileged to be one of George’s students, but he probably had more influence on my professional life than anyone else.” I myself was one of the lucky ones who got to learn from him both at KU

and when I wasn't in Kansas anymore. Beyond professor and mentor, he has been a life-long friend, an inimitable model of professional conduct, and a never-ending source of support. I speak on behalf of all of us "Woodyarditos" when I say that we are who we are today thanks to George Woodyard. Even after "retirement," George continued to crank out publications and conference presentations, all while reading and watching way more plays, remembering much more theatrical trivia, and walking much faster than any of us ever could. We were, however, always there, just one step behind, waiting for the next cue. We followed George doggedly, not only to Lawrence — a veritable mecca of Latin American theatre —, but also to Mexico, Spain, France, Argentina, and wherever else he might decide to go. We treasured his friendship with deep respect and utter devotion. We not only wanted to be with him; we wanted to be just like him.

George took us in, helped us grow without changing us completely, showed us the Yellow Brick Road, and then let us walk it with him. That exciting road led to many trips, many plays and an endless supply of laughs and special memories. George admittedly failed to teach us how to say "no," but he did teach us the importance of collegiality, generosity, modesty, and selflessness. Who else would put aside his own unfinished book to finish the book left behind by a departed colleague? Who else would continue to recommend for anything and everything former students who graduated decades ago? And who else would host five LATT conferences just so that all of us could get together and have fun? The Woodyards' hospitality is legendary. Each conference (1982, 1992, 1997, 2000, 2003) concluded at their home with a huge *pachanga* that often included school buses, live *latino* music, and the arrival of the police. We thank Eleanor for all those parties and, most importantly, for graciously sharing George and always making us feel like part of the Woodyard family.

George's legacy will live on in many forms: his large family; the libraries of the University of Kansas and Eastern Illinois, to which he donated his extensive collection of Latin American theatre; the *Latin American Theatre Review*; the LATR Books Press that he established upon his "retirement"; the theatre award established in his name at the 2005 LATT conference to recognize outstanding new plays written by Latin American playwrights; the George Woodyard Scholarship; a thriving arboretum on the outskirts of Lawrence; the active Lawrence Community Theatre; his church, to which he provided years of leadership, and finally, his students, who will cherish his memory and continue to want to be just like him.

We got a glimpse of the legacy George wanted to leave in a document titled “Lessons for a Lifetime,” which he seems to have humbly written for himself in November 2001 and which his daughter found on his computer. It lists 17 lessons that George wanted to remember, and the last lesson is this: “Live your life so that at the end, whenever that comes, people will remember you charitably for your selflessness and your kindness.” That is George’s life in a nutshell. His kindness, generosity, hospitality, and humor remained present even after his final departure. The visitation at the church was followed by a LATT-style *pachanga* replete with wine, food, laughter and a cake adorned with the words “Happy traveling!” We do indeed wish George happy travels and assign him an “A” as his final grade, along with the comment that we invariably found at the end of our term papers: ¡BIEN HECHO!

Note

¹ George’s modesty and humor shine through in an auto/archive that he prepared for a special issue of *Theatre Journal* 56.3 (2004): 547-51.

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Jackie Bixler and George Woodyard presenting in Mexico