

SHIRLEY A. MARNEUS

1935 – 2020

An Appreciation

Shirley Aileen Hooper Marneus, Caltech Lecturer in Theater Arts, Emeritus, passed away on Wednesday, January 13, 2020, at 84 years of age. A force of nature who could charm or cow a senior administrator with equal facility, Shirley, as she was universally known, created the Theater Arts at the California Institute of Technology (TACIT) program out of thin air and directed some 80 shows of all sizes and vintages, including 15 musicals, before her retirement in 2008. By doing so, she provided a creative outlet and a safety valve for the academic pressure cooker, keeping generations of Techers sane.

Born on March 12, 1935, Shirley came to Los Angeles with a BA in theater (San Jose State College, 1959) and an MFA in directing (the State University of Iowa, 1962). She found work in the costume department at NBC and on- and offstage at the Pasadena Playhouse, but with two children to support she needed a steady job. In 1970 she applied for a position in the Public Affairs Room in Caltech's Dabney Hall of the Humanities. As Shirley told the tale, her interview with the librarian went swimmingly until the chat turned to theater. "She said offhandedly, 'You know, Bacon wrote all of Shakespeare's works.' I looked her STRAIGHT in the eye, and said, "NONSENSE!" I got hired anyway."

Among her patrons was English professor and playwright Oscar Mandel, who'd seen her in the Playhouse's 1965 production of his "Dance to No Music." The two would talk shop, and soon began planning a "paraprofessional" campus theater company to mount underperformed classics. "I produced the plays, Shirley directed them, and we got a very well-known designer [Barry Frost] from Beverly Hills to do the sets," Mandel recalls. "I would never have done it if Shirley hadn't been there." Spectrum Productions debuted in Caltech's brand-new Ramo Auditorium in March, 1972 with a fresh translation of Molière's *Amphitryon* by Mandel. Spectrum toured Europe twice to

critical acclaim, and staged shows in Ramo for nearly a decade—but not with student actors. “We were very clear on that,” Mandel says.

The undergrads took notice, however. Says Chris Harcourt (BS '77, history), “It was on the strength of Spectrum . . . that Greg Simay [BS '75, applied physics], Kent Nakamoto [BS '75, chemistry], and I engaged her to direct [the 1974 student musical] *Kiss Me, Kate*.”

Shirley directed the students again in 1977's *Guys and Dolls*, a show inspired by Damon Runyan's tales of lowlifes and hijinks in Manhattan and Havana. The opening street scene called for crowds of hustlers and tourists and she went for broke, recruiting a who's-who of faculty members: Chemist Harry Gray, mechanical engineer Chris Brennen, historian Lance Davis, mathematician Charles DePrima, environmental engineer Jim Morgan, and solar astronomer Hal Zirin, among others. While others might have wilted in the glare of so much academic wattage, Shirley, who had worked with the likes of Jack Benny, Dick Van Dyke, and Judy Garland, was unflappable. Harry Gray, who had a major role as gambler Harry the Horse, says, “She told me, ‘Harry, you are a great guy but you can't act and you can't sing so shut up and listen to me.’”

Physics Nobelist Richard Feynman played the bongos in a Cuban café, and provided the voice of gambler Joey Biltmore over the “god-speaker.” Recalls Bruce McLaughlin (BS '77, astronomy) “As he was sitting up in the sound booth, waiting at the mic for his cue, he turned to us and beamed, “This is so much fun!” A tradition of faculty cameo appearances was born; Feynman and Marneus became lifelong friends; and Feynman turned into a TACIT “regular,” most famously as a Polynesian chief in *South Pacific*.

Guys and Dolls also introduced Shirley to the workings of the Caltech mind. In one scene change, Mylar stars dangled over the stage while a crescent moon “rose” in the background. Sophomore Tod Lauer (BS '79, astronomy), pointed out that the stars were hanging in front of the moon. “Shirley assured me that no one would notice,” he recalls. “Sure enough I found myself in the lobby [when] one guy asked his friend how he had liked the show. His reply: ‘It was great, except that the moon was behind the stars.’” From then on, teaching the suspension of disbelief became a standard part of Shirley's unofficial curriculum.

When Marvin “Murph” Goldberger arrived as Caltech’s fifth president, Shirley naturally invited him and his wife to appear in 1979’s *The Music Man* — as a sight gag in “Ya Got Trouble,” replicating the portrait of the dour farm couple in Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* but framed by a pool table. Murph was so taken by the experience that he provided the seed money for what would eventually become TACIT.

While TACIT was “sold” to the Institute as a component of the well-rounded undergraduate experience, it couldn’t sustain itself with student participation alone. (Lauer acknowledges that technical-directing *Guys and Dolls* “blasted a deep crater in my GPA.”) Shirley welcomed grad students, postdocs, faculty, and staff (both Caltech and JPL, which Caltech runs for NASA) — and their spouses, significant others, siblings, offspring, and friends under the catchall of “Caltech Community.”

Mark Ryne, a spacecraft navigator at JPL, enlisted his wife and three daughters, collectively known as the Ryne Maidens, much to Shirley’s delight. “[She] saw an entire family she could drag on stage,” he says. “My 12-year-old daughter Beth was a budding actress . . . [preschooler Julie] would sit on a Nobel Laureate’s lap and pull his beard, [middle daughter Linda] fell in love with all the boys, and [wife Cathy] was mother to all the students.”

Being part of TACIT was “the first time I had peers who weren’t my fellow students,” says Gary Olsen (BS ’94). “How old we were or what part of the Caltech community we came from didn’t matter; we were all equals working toward a common goal. This was a critical shift in perspective that helped me hold my own [in later years] when I became a manager, leading others who were typically older and more experienced than I was.”

With great brainpower comes great flexibility. Academia happens: Shirley grew adept at rehearsing scenes with a major character or two missing. One of the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was presenting a paper in Rome the week before the show opened, for example, and the World Wide Wicket Company’s personnel manager had to ditch two weeks of rehearsals for *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* in favor of observing time on a Chilean telescope. It was not uncommon for opening night to be the first evening that the entire cast of a large show was in the theater simultaneously.

Excused absences notwithstanding, Shirley held her troupe to the professional standards of live television. Punctuality, a trait foreign to many Techers, was a must. Neophytes got their first dose of stage discipline in Standard Shirley Speech Number One, usually delivered at a quarter past call time a week or so into rehearsal. Tired of waiting for stragglers, she would erupt in a bellow made baritone by two packs of cigarettes a day, “GODDAMMIT, when I say rehearsal begins at 7:30, I mean you are ON STAGE, WARMED UP, and READY to WORK at 7:30! It does NOT mean you come rolling into MY THEATER at a quarter to EIGHT with your bag of greasy MacDonald’s and SIT in the FRONT row eating FRENCH FRIES and playing GRABASS and CLUTCHBUTT with your FRIENDS!” Even TACIT veterans would quail, and subsequent rehearsals would start on the dot.

Shirley cast by intuition. She had a “mysterious sense of who to put where,” says Lauer. “Most of us had never performed in our lives. But, as do the best leaders, she knew how to get the best out of us, figuring out who could do the heavy lifting and who could blend into the background and yet give a little life to the worlds she created.” Says Todd Brun (MS ’91, PhD ’94, physics), “I was never much of a singer or dancer, but I loved theater and wanted to do something other than math and science in my spare time.” Brun auditioned for *Camelot* (1990) shortly after arriving on campus. “[Shirley] cast me as Mordred, the villain of the piece. It was exciting, and terrifying, but Shirley’s warmth and absolute confidence made me give it my all, and not worry about making a fool of myself.”

“Shirley would always make sure we left everything at the door and were there and present for rehearsals,” says Phil Rodriguez (BS ’98, engineering and applied science). Present in the moment, that is — every character in every scene had to have a purpose, a reason for being there.

“GODDAMMIT,” she’d roar from Ramo Auditorium’s back row, “If you’ve got flowers to sell, SELL ME FLOWERS! Don’t just stand there holding them limp in your hand!” Shirley “nurtured the imagination and promoted that sense of play which is so important in the sciences and yet so often overlooked,” Olsen says. She taught literal minds to think broadly. “No, I DON’T know where the door will be. We don’t have a set yet. When we’ve BUILT the DOOR, you will walk THROUGH it. UNTIL then, PRETEND!”

Shirley composed the layers of action onstage with a painter’s eye, but all this blocking and choreography took time — much of it spent sitting around when it wasn’t your moment to shine. Undergrads and minor children had standing orders to do their homework; the older folks occupied

themselves as best they could. Says Diane Lang, then a copy editor in Caltech's public relations office, "I was a "Pick-a-Little" lady [in *The Music Man*], and Robert [Lang (BS'82, electrical engineering, PhD '86, applied physics)] was in the barbershop quartet. [Shirley] had blocked us, and a couple other people, into a small group while she worked with other cast members. We were together just long enough to establish an ongoing joke that we revived whenever we passed one another on campus. Years later, in *Kismet* (1986), she blocked our characters in close proximity, as we were about to be engaged." Five more TACIT couples have since wed, and all six marriages are still going strong.

In due course, a second generation of TACIT players arose. Mark Adler (PhD '90, physics) met his future wife, Diana St. James, when she played Morgan Le Fay to his King Arthur in *Camelot*. Joshua, their firstborn, debuted on the fuzzy line between prop and actor in 1993's *Hello, Dolly!*. During a dress rehearsal, St. James says, "Shirley decided the parade [at the end of Act I] wasn't homespun enough, and declared she needed a toddler in a red wagon." Pulled by his dad in Caltech's Bucky the Beaver mascot costume, one-year-old Josh waved and smiled at the crowd, stealing the show. "A ham was born," says St. James, and Josh appeared in many more TACIT productions. (He now has a BA in theater from Cal Poly Pomona.)

As the calendar accelerated toward the final week before opening, commonly known as Hell Week, "rehearsals sometimes went late," says Brun. "People got tired and cranky. Shirley could have a temper at times: 'Stop forming a line on stage, I could drive a spear straight through all of you!'" But then she'd laugh her booming laugh, and coax, wheedle and charm her actors . . . It was extraordinary." John Sadowski (BS 2007, chemistry), has a slightly different memory of Standard Shirley Speech Number Two. "I've continued to do theater throughout the years, and . . . every time we run blocking, I swear I can still hear Shirley's voice admonishing, 'You're standing in a line! I could drive a skewer right through you!'"

A voracious reader, Shirley had an encyclopedic knowledge of history to go with her love of spectacle. (For nine years, she even team-taught a Shakespeare course with literature professor Jenijoy LaBelle.) Thus the nobles in *Henry V* had banners with their correct personal heraldic arms, and on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt the vastly outnumbered English army knelt to kiss the dirt to acknowledge their likely deaths on the morrow.

Some inspirations came very late in the game, however. Allen Corcorran (BS '91, engineering and applied science), says that “a common occurrence during Hell Week was to hear her shout from the back of Ramo, ‘Well, I hate it!’ We'd roll our eyes and dig in for an extra hour, but after we worked it, it was always a significant improvement.” Olsen agrees. “She was notorious for reworking a major scene shortly before we opened. Even so . . . it never felt unfocused, desperate, or out of control, and it taught me that sometimes when something isn't working, tweaking [it] is the wrong approach. Sometimes it's best to throw away what you've got, keep in mind the lessons you've learned, and start from scratch.”

Shirley's admonition, “The only way not to make an ass of yourself on stage, IS TO MAKE AN ASS OF YOURSELF ON STAGE!” stuck with Lauer. “Own the stage. Don't hold back, have the courage to take your place and put it out there. . . Science in the end is communication, a story, a world to share, and Shirley's charge is never far from my thoughts.”

But Shirley's true genius was her ability to see more in people than they saw in themselves. Beth Ryne, Mark's oldest daughter, who now works in Hollywood as a casting agent and acting coach, says, “The greatest gift a young person can receive is from an adult who recognizes [that] young person's passion, takes it seriously, and nurtures its development. . . . I was just the 12-year-old daughter of a JPL scientist and she saw something in me that she must have seen in herself. She encouraged my creative passion and intellectual curiosity. . . . Thanks to Shirley, I did Shakespeare at 14, stage managed at 15, and was coaching her (adult) actors at 16. . . . Her confidence in me was deeply formative.” Says Brun (who met his future wife in 1993's *The Importance of Being Earnest*), “Shirley did more than touch my life — she transformed it, utterly. I can't imagine where or what I would be if I hadn't decided to go to that audition for *Camelot*. She was an artist, a taskmaster, a cheerleader, a teacher, a role model, and above all, a friend. For as long as I can remember myself, I will miss her and honor her memory.”

In 1999, Shirley named an Honorary Member of the Caltech Alumni Association by vote of the alumni. As Caltech does not award honorary degrees, even to Commencement speakers, this is as close to having one as it is possible to get.

Shirley was also a prize-winning grower of orchids, a member of the Epiphyllum Society of North America and the Southern California Horticultural Society, and a proud member of the American Civil Liberties Union. She is survived by a son, Christopher Marneus, 54, of Winnetka, CA.

Plans for a memorial are pending.

The official Caltech obituary may be found [here](#).

Donations to TACIT in Shirley's memory can be made [here](#).

— *Douglas L. Smith*

January 30, 2020