

Alvin J. Keller

1922-1996

PROFESSOR OF THEATRE, EMERITUS

B.A., University of California, Los Angeles; M.F.A., Yale University;
Ph.D., Speech and Drama, Stanford University, October 1, 1965
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1966 To June 5, 1987
Birth: July 15, 1922; Death: February 10, 1996

The curtain dropped suddenly at a highpoint in the action for Al Keller. There were no lingering sad farewells. After an evening in the theatre, followed by a wonderful dinner with a friend, Al stepped through the final curtain. It was fitting that at the packed Church at the Forest Lawn in Cypress, following a series of testimonials of the meaning of his life, the audience rose to their feet in a prolonged standing ovation.

He was born and grew up in the Los Angeles area to devoted parents who provided him with a loving, caring homelife and encouraged him to dream and to love learning. At every opportunity, he and his cousin caught the 'Red Car' and for twenty-five cents they rode from Echo Park into Los Angeles where they could see movies. From the beginning, theatre became the focus of his life.

He dedicated his efforts and love to the rearing of his daughter Elissa, whose talented mother and his devoted wife died while Elissa was yet a baby. Elissa lovingly welcomed those who attended the 'service of celebration' of Al's life, recalling incidents of his childhood which he had shared with her; stories of his wonderful family which included extended family members.

Al was president of his senior class at Belmont High School, a graduate of U.C.L.A., attended Berkeley, Yale, and took his doctorate at Stanford. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and went to Amsterdam where he wrote a play that was later produced off-Broadway.

Professionally, his entire focus was the Theatre. The stage on which he chose to direct, was in academia, specifically at California State University, Fullerton. As the second chair of the department, he served for 15 years. During his tenure as chair, the department established the master of fine arts degree program -- the first in the CSU system -- and launched the semi-professional Cabaret Repertory Theatre in cooperation with the Cultural Groups Foundation of northern Orange County, serving as its artistic director. He created the Playwrights Theatre Program, which awarded annual prizes for new plays produced in the department.

Al Keller was a guiding force in CSUF's active participation in the American College Theatre Festival and directed seven university productions that were selected as regional finalists. His staging of the original student script, "Bulldog and the Bear" during the 1980's was one of two Cal State Fullerton productions selected as national finalist for performance at the Kennedy Center.

When he was not in the theatre directing a play, he could be found at a movie, at a professional stage play in some part of the world, at a community college play, or perhaps judging a high school festival of plays. If he were not in attendance

somewhere, he would be in his chair in his home reading a play and thinking about choosing one to direct. He had no time for idle chit chat. Speaking for most people who knew Al, Joe Arnold, the third chair of the department of Theatre and Dance says this about being with him.

"He was also, in the deepest sense of the word, one of my teachers. If we are lucky enough in life, we find among our companions those who can both share the delights and sorrows of being human, as well as teach us profound lessons about who we are and how we should dedicate our lives.

It was not just the good humor, dedication and sensitivity of the man that will always remain with me. It is the passion for the art and, in turn, the passion for life that he instilled in us that will never fade. Spending time with Al, whether in the theatre or just in conversation, always brought out the best in us...his presence always reminded you that you had more...that you could be better and achieve more than you had thought you could."

Al was fascinated by the genius of those who sensitively articulated the meaning of life as they developed on page the characters who lived it, but who did not know they were interesting. As noted, he even wrote plays and in the doing, no doubt he developed a deep respect for the skill and devotion and sensitive insights possessed by professional writers.

In his search for his own identity, he began to recognize his need to share his discoveries with students of the theatre. By their own testimony, Al saw in his students potential they had not yet realized. By priming the wells of their talents through his directing, he was able to bring the best of those talents to the surface. In his interpretations of the characters they were to portray, he helped them to safely experience the realities of life vicariously. He helped them to explore and portray on stage, the characters honestly and with no personal prejudices about their choices.

He understood audiences. He was not afraid to challenge them to look squarely at social, psychological, political and other problems of all times as lived by the people portraying slices of life on stage. He did not deliberately confront nor affront anyone, playwright, student, audience member. He was wise, and he was strong. He did not sit in judgment of those whose lives he reincarnated from the printed page. He did not sit in judgment of actors who worked under his direction to give life to the literature of playwrighting giants even though they were sometimes in great conflict between their personal mores and ideals and those of the characters whom they were asked to portray.

When you part from your friend, you grieve not, for that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.

It is life in quest for life in bodies that fear the grave.

There are no graves here. These mountains and plains are a cradle and a stepping-stone. Whenever you pass by the field where you have laid your ancestors look well thereupon, and you shall see yourselves and your children dancing hand in hand. Verily you often make merry without knowing.

As a final tribute of love to her father, Elissa has written

"If The Shoe Fits Wear It"

I know it sounds like a cliché -- but it's a poem for Father's day!
The way to your toes, so the story goes,
Is how to say it best. YOU'RE THE GREATEST DAY THERE IS.
Better than all the rest!

You're my mother, my father, my brother, my sister
My friend and mentor, too!
Can you believe all of those things fit in one pair of shoes?

I wanted to thank you for all of the love, I know it wasn't all free.
But you forgot to tell me, there wasn't a money tree!
You're the Greatest Dad there is, The best there will be.
You share all the love and the care and the smiles,
With everyone else, PLUS ME!

How can you fit all that in your shoes? You must have some Giant feet!
Dad, you taught me how to share, how to love and how to care
You're the greatest in the land. You always lend a guiding hand.
Anybody that we know, will tell you that "I told you so!"

My Dad is great, my dad is good. He did his job for fatherhood.
Thank you Dad for listening to what I had to say
And let me tell you please, HAVE A HAPPY FATHER'S DAY
- Love, Elissa Abbey Keller

Submitted by
James D. Young
Founder, Department of Theatre and Dance
Professor of Theatre, Emeritus
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