Leon Katz

(July 10, 1919–January 23, 2017) was a professor, dramatist, dramaturg, scholar, historian, director, producer, and actor—and a friend, mentor and surrogate father to countless of us within the American Theatre, Television and Film communities.

Leon's Theatre history classes were more like popular speaking series than required courses: Hyperactive students across Theatre disciplines all in one hall, silently captivated by a striking man wearing an unusually large ring, sipping Diet Coke from a Gertrude Stein beer stein and telling us stories—with no notes and only the occasional, erratic attempt at using slides. How artists fortified and confounded the logic of the times and the audiences' expectations—with inventions, deconstructions and bastardizations of form—as they were celebrated, worshipped, ignored, imprisoned, and executed: He revealed to us the history of Western Drama as its own mythology.

And he did so without artifice or conceit. Our silence wasn't required. In fact, he was an ideal collaborator. He could be just as captivating in rehearsals and script meetings, and at the deli or his home. Warm, compassionate, exceedingly generous, and often hilariously inappropriate, he was our sometimes-testy, unfaltering friend.

In some ways, Leon was a throwback to the legendary Jewish communist scholars from his days as a student in New York in the 30s and 40s. According to Leon, then, you were either with the Stalinists or with the Trotskyites; holdover Leninists and run-of-the-mill socialists were the only outliers. Yet his courses weren't political, or apolitical, nor did they focus through or dissuade us from any particular identity lens. From his days in Paris in the early 50s, he was a living connection to the history of modernism, an actual participant in Alice Toklas's salon. The influences were clear in much of his writing, but not all.

Leon's interests were sparked by New York's Yiddish Theatre of the 20s and 30s. He'd go on to write a master's thesis on O'Neill, a doctoral dissertation on Stein, and numerous plays centering on the most ridiculous and vilest human tendencies. But he also wrote children's plays and a script for Roger Corman. Passionately in love with the avant-garde, he refused to marry it. He was a convinced atheist, yet one of his best friends (and frequent collaborators) was a nun.

Aware of his atheism, on a few occasions, Martha Coigney (1933–2016), Director Emerita of the International Theatre Institute of the U.S., told me she thought Leon was still "the most religious person [she] had ever met." Martha was Leon's student at Vassar from 1950–1954—forty years before I'd meet Leon, fifty years before I'd meet her.

As he taught into his late 80s, it had long been common for Leon's students also to be the students of his former students. Toward the end of his career, it was increasingly common for this next generation of students to be introducing him as a lecturer to theirs. It was, perhaps, because of this "religion," as Martha put it, that he was a link like no other, between every stylistic camp in our field, and why she, like so many of us, never lost touch with him, and why he was such a rare friend.

Leon found as much joy in *Everybody Loves Raymond* as he did in commedia, and as much mystery in hand puppets as in Bunraku. He was an expert on it all because he found solace in it all, as long as it was in tune with its mythology—fortifying and/or confounding contemporary logic and expectations—whether stemming from existential dread or everyday familial strife.

Some of us have joked that Leon got his feet wet during the first weekend of the new administration, and then decided it was enough. The inmates were taking control of the asylum. Leon, however, had contributed enough for multiple lifetimes. As the logic of our times was being handed to the whim of a lunatic, and our culture seemed as divided as ever, it was now up to us.

Jared J. Stein
June 12, 2017