

The Boards

B.C.'s WEEKLY THEATRE WEB-ZINE

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JOHNN JULIANI died early Thursday morning at 61 years of age. CBC Radio One reported in the early afternoon that he had been diagnosed recently with liver cancer.

John's professional life over the last four decades found him being an actor, director, producer, writer and educator, who was equally at home in classical, contemporary and experimental work, in television, film, radio and opera. A classicist by training, an experimentalist by reputation, his career took him across the country, as well as around the world.

Born to a working-class family in Montréal's Italian neighbourhood, theatre arts were not so much something that was discouraged by his parents, as something not seen as being an option. At this spring's "Making a Scene" Conference, during a question and answer period, he said that the last thing he expected to be doing at this time of his life was to be "staging a thorough presentation of Shakespeare - or any classical author - on the opposite side of the country from where I was born! But..." he added, in typically wry understated style, "here I am."

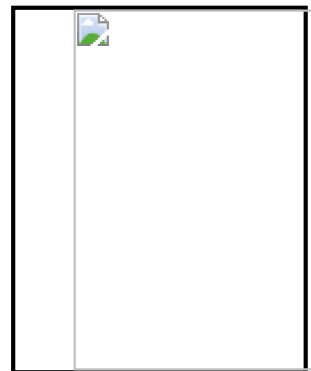
After studying under Jesuit Priests who encouraged him in an exploration of his intellectual potential, he went on to become an early graduate of the National Theatre School. Afterwards, he became involved in creating locally-focused theatre in Québec before being lured out to the West Coast for a job. "It was insane - I had no prospects following it, I had nowhere to stay lined up, I didn't know a soul in Vancouver! But I went anyway. It was the early 70s - you could do that sort of thing." When the job was finished, he wanted to stay, but had no reason to. He was literally about to leave town - on the porch of the house he was staying at in the West End, waiting for his cab, the door open behind him - when the telephone rang. Being the only one home at the time, he let it ring; thinking that it if was for someone else, they weren't there to take the call and if it was for him, it didn't matter. "But, it kept on ringing, so I thought 'I don't have anything better to do.'" It was a call asking him if he wanted to teach theatre for the next year. And so, he stayed in the city he was to call home for the next three decades.

From 1982 to 1997, he was Executive Producer of Radio Drama for CBC Radio Vancouver. During that time, he directed countless celebrated radio plays for the Corporation, and had as his Production Assistant Dagmar Kaffanke-Nunn for the entire period. The production she remembers the most vividly was the 1990 recording of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Riga. When first performed on the stage of the Vancouver Playhouse over fifteen years earlier, the cast included Chief Dan George, who had died in 1981. Choosing to chance that talent flowed through blood-line, he cast Dan's son Leonard in the role. John's over-riding passionate *raison d'être* was one of telling a story in the best way possible. It didn't matter to him what the experience level of the performer was, he got the best possible performance from them in service to the text. When the less-than-experienced Leonard George had finished his portion of the recording, Kaffanke-Nunn recalled today, much of the studio was in tears, such was the intensity and passionate honesty of his performance. John might not have been the most loveable director in the business at times, but he certainly knew what he was doing.

In 1966, John started a theatre company called Savage God, taking the name from a poem of William Butler Yeats; written after realizing that a performance he had seen signalled a newer, more questioning, art form that was less satisfied with the pat answers presented to life's questions, Yeats being drawn to ask: "After us, the Savage God?" The term, to John, "became a way in which I identified my independent work in the theatre" he explained on the company's web-site. "Savage God has always represented the Imagination, in the Blakean sense - a deity of sorts for artists, and the very underpinnings for the iconoclasm and need for change and seeing things anew that is the essence of all artistic endeavour," he explained. "In its fierce fondness for contradiction, its wariness of categorization, and its penchant for embracing and reconciling opposites, the Imagination can be savage. There need be no intrinsic contradiction between being savage and being gentle, and certainly none between God and the Imagination. In a fundamental way, God is the Imagination as much as He/She is Love, and cannot a God of Love be both gentle and fierce?" Recently, the company is known almost exclusively for *The Shakespeare Project*, but during its time has performed in Gastown alleys, a gymnasium in Krakow, a Californian hillside, the original Vancouver Art Gallery which was located roughly where the BC Gas Building is now, as well as the Anglican Cathedrals of Downtown. The shows they produced were just as diverse: *The Shakespeare Project*, and *Word, Words, Words*, both readings of literary works at the Cathedral, using the best professional actors he could find; the thought-provoking plays written by Mark Leiren-Young *Articles of Faith* and *Shylock*, the former about the Anglican blessing of same-sex marriage, the latter about an actor of Jewish heritage playing the money-lender in the Merchant of Venice; and *I (Love) the D.T.E.S. (Downtown Eastside)* which presented the words and thoughts of residents or former residents of the "DTES" or its immediate environs - with a cast of those self same individuals - with the establishment of a permanent Arts Centre in the neighbourhood as its goal.

Most Honourable Reverend Peter Elliot, Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, described John as having an "intelligence of an astonishingly high level. And an irascibility, a toughness that could really be quite disarming." It may have been precisely those qualities that allowed him to gain permission from the Dean to stage Savage God's seemingly impossible goal of actors performing the entire Shakespearean Canon, including the sonnets and epic poems: *The Shakespeare Project*

The Shakespeare Project was a way for John to bring together several interests of his: performed readings of the Bard's entire canon was the kind of challenge he relished; he was a passionate lover of the classics, and felt they had been kept too



long on the shelf, away from the immediacy of everyday-life as they were first presented; and it was a chance to provide the talented up-and-coming actors of the community the opportunity to both demonstrate their skills with difficult text, as well as to work along-side seasoned veterans. It would not be unusual at a rehearsal (laughingly called by him “Savage God Boot-Camp”) to see a rank apprentice actor in a major role, struggling to keep up with the break-neck pace, glance up to find Gwynyth Walsh (*DaVinci's Inquest*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *ER*) doing exactly the same thing. The actor, who thought they were the only one scrambling, thus re-assured that they were doing just fine, was permitted a greater understanding of the old maxim that ‘there is no such thing as a good or bad actor, we are all ultimately the same’.

Life with John was one of “constant motion”, Donna Wong-Juliani told CBC Arts Reporter Trevor Hughes. His wife and artistic collaborator of 35 years, Donna often found it difficult to keep up with his ability to be passionately committed to many projects at once. Up until his death he was almost simultaneously directing Shakespeare Project productions; co-Artistic Director of Opera Breve, instrumental in bringing small opera to the intersection of Main and Hastings; President of U.B.C.P./Actra; an active member of C.A.E.A. (Equity), having served several years on its West Coast Advisory Committee; recent past president of the Directors' Guild of Canada; a myriad of fund-raising events for P.A.L. so that those in the arts community who had retired but had no viable support might have a place to live their final years, keeping with his passionate advocating for the rights of creative artists in all fields. Frequently, during rehearsals, John would take a call on his mobile phone, fully expecting the actors to carry-on with their work And woe-betide those that did not! He may be dealing with a matter coming up at a U.B.C.P. meeting on the phone, but he was still watching what was going on in rehearsal - ‘he had not stopped paying attention to the actors’ job, so why should they?’ And he would often prove the actors’ suspicions ill-founded when he would give notes on performances given during the call. Multi-tasking, thy name was ‘John Juliani’.

Memorial Services are expected sometime in the first week of September. Details will be made public following a discussion between Donna Wong-Juliani and their son Alessandro, who today rushed back from Westbank (where he was performing the role of Lysander in Bard on the Vineyard's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) to be with her.

John Juliani: Actor, Director, Producer, intellectual, ardent nationalist, husband, father, and passionate advocate for a better society both for and with the arts. So much was accomplished from March 1942 - August 2003.

I was directed by him. I respected him. I liked him. And I, like many of you I am sure, will miss him.

Ian Alexander Martin, Editor

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