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Message from President Leon Botstein

It is with profound sadness that I share with the Bard community the news of the death of John Pruitt, who died late Friday evening at the age of 66. For the past several years John, with characteristic dignity, kindness, humility and generosity, battled brain cancer. Yet he continued to teach, all the way through to the end of last semester.

John came to Bard in 1981. For nearly four decades, he was a central and guiding figure in the Film Program. He inspired generations of Bard students, majors and non-majors alike, in lectures and seminars with his refined, elegant and acute insights in the nature and history of the film medium.

John was more than a teacher of film history and criticism; he was a committed exponent of the liberal arts. Few matched the range and depth of his interests. He was versed in literature, German, the classics, music, painting, and philosophy. Throughout his career at Bard he was a leading defender of general education and a tireless advocate of students. Few have devoted as much time and effort to the life of the college, bridging divisions and programs and creating a sense of a shared mission. John was a

leader in the faculty. He led with calm, patience, empathy, humor and an unfailing instinct for how to defuse conflicts and resolve disagreements. John exemplified the best of Bard. He had a truly rare quality: the uncommon and uncompromising gift of friendship.

John is survived by his wife, Sheila Moloney '84, and their two children, Ida and Willa.

A memorial service will take place on Saturday, July 13. Details will be circulated as soon as the arrangements have been confirmed.

Remembrances

Taking John Pruitt's Intro to Film History was one of my formative experiences at Bard. I had been warned about the difficulty of his class and the power of his lectures. When I did well on my first paper and received praise from him about my ideas I felt elated! From then on he became a star to me and a professor with whom I longed to share my ideas and to hopefully impress. His lectures were heady and poetic. He used words like "elegiac" to describe the world of certain films and spoke with reverence about the images in ways that deeply affected me.

Learning from him felt like I had truly made it to a place where ideas not only mattered but could transform us. While I did not major in film I continued to take a class with him every semester including the unforgettable, "Italian Neo-Realism" which he co-taught with the amazing William Weaver. I remember the small intimate discussions in Preston. I remember, we went to the city, we saw Opera. We stopped at Wendy's on the way back. It was thrilling.

John continued to be a mentor to me during my years at Bard. He even asked me to baby sit for his then new born daughter. I was honored to have the job.

All these years later, talking about film is still one of my most favorite activities. I wish I still wrote about it. I wish John Pruitt was still with us to inspire new generations of students. His passion, kindness and true dedication to education will live on.

Much love to his family, friends, students and the entire Bard Community.

-- **Cara Cibener '96**

It's heart-breaking to receive this. John has been one of the kindest senior colleagues to me in my short time at Bard. I knew that he wanted to continue teaching despite his battles with illness. And felt extremely sad when his students wanted to transfer out of Bard. I remember very well too the midway board we sat on for a student who broke down, and in his attempt to comfort her John said, "I think you should relax ... I don't understand why you're crying ... We are the good guys!" He was such a charmer!

I enjoyed our numerous lunch conversations. And his hearty appetite for Kline pizza! When I'd just arrived he wanted to make me feel comfortable by drawing on his connections to China – by talking about his grandmother who was a missionary in China in the 1900s in the Boxer Rebellion! Once when he learnt that I didn't drive, he said he would pay me to learn driving, just so that I could take him out for movies and hangout from time to time! I will truly, truly miss him.

Regards,

Wah Guan

Dear all,

The President's paean to John Pruitt captures him well. He had perhaps the most acute sense of ethics of any professor, and though it made him argumentative, there was never any evidence of ego behind it. When my wife Nancy was laid off from the Fisher Center John was the only faculty member who called her to express how sorry he was - that meant a tremendous deal to both of us, and cemented our image of him as an angel. I succeeded him as division chair, and once when I timidly suggested that his interference with how I was doing the job suggested a lack of faith in me, he utterly melted and apologized so sweetly and with so many reassurances that I felt like an ogre for having brought it up. In short, he could drive you a little nuts, but you could always trust that his motivations were selfless and focused on the right action and the greater good. I will miss his long, soft-spoken monologues in Arts Division meetings, which brought up points everyone else had missed and challenged us to keep our discourse on the highest level.

In sympathy,

Kyle Gann

Dear All,

When I came to Bard years ago to teach film criticism and screenwriting John was a welcoming and wonderful colleague, encouraging me to develop other courses centered on my interests in various directors and critical theory. John was as supportive of my work as a journalist and filmmaker as he was of my teaching activities. His enthusiasm and constancy touched me. We kept in touch, and in recent years saw more of each other. Since returning to teach at Bard, our renewed connection as colleagues has been a pleasure and a gift I've cherished.

To all that has been said about John's deeply ethical nature; his kind, patient, and caring disposition; his devotion to students, colleagues, and the college; his humor, wit, and vast knowledge; his love of film, literature, nature, learning, and people, I'd like to add that John's capacity to be present, to deeply listen, always struck me as remarkable. John attended to the space between people and knew how to let the moment or a conversation find its own center of gravity. His deep reverence for and curiosity about life's mysteries was palpable, and he transmitted this sense of awe and excitement to generations of Bard students. I love that he was equally animated by ethical concerns as by esthetic and intellectual ones. Some of our best moments of bonding happened in shared moral indignation.

I know I am not alone in my admiration for the extraordinary way in which John bore his illness and faced his end with the same loving kindness, openness, and dignity with which he lived his excellent life. In his final days, with family and friends gathered around him, and often eating ice cream with him, John by being John, reminded me that to love life so much, to be present to others—especially at the very end — takes courage.

He never turned away, nor was distracted from the simple and wondrous acts of human connection. Life was always in play, and John gave his all.

Ann Lauterbach's eloquent lines about how the disappearance of a certain figure makes a landscape bereft capture the ache of losing this exceptional and generous man beloved by so many. Yet I find myself comforted by the memory of John striding across campus wearing his dark tan hat — half western, half noir. Among his many fine traits, I will also miss the care he took with his haberdashery — the earth-toned sweaters, the hat, the tie. These too were for us.

In sympathy,

Lisa Katzman

Hello,

I'm not sure whom I can send this note to, so I'll just try replying to this e-mail.

I am very sad to hear of Prof. Pruitt's passing and have spent the last few days thinking about it.

I loved all of my teachers at Bard, but Prof. Pruitt has a special place in my heart for a few reasons. One is that Prof. Pruitt was a special sort of intellectual that really encouraged the sort of thinking that was at the heart of the liberal arts education that I received. He co-taught a seminar on the films of Luchino Visconti with the late Prof. William Weaver, and this was without a doubt the most important course I've ever taken. The basic idea behind the course was that we would watch several Visconti films and read the novels that they were based on. Rather than provide any lectures or additional readings or written assignments, we simply talked as a group about what we'd seen and what we'd read. The ways in which he challenged us to come up with our own ideas and questions was something I'd never quite encountered before. It was even more open-ended and intellectually stimulating (and difficult) than I had encountered with other Bard professors. I could see how much Prof. Pruitt loved this style of teaching, and part of it was the ability to delve into the subject matter himself and see it through other eyes (ours, but also those of Prof. Weaver, who had endless anecdotes about the various actors and filmmakers we were studying).

I failed to complete on time the one assignment that we had for the course, which was a 20-page essay. Since this was my last semester, there was no way for him to grade me and then revise the grade later when I submitted the paper, and so in the end he graded me on the trust that I would complete the essay of an appropriate quality and send it to him after graduation, which I did eventually do three months later.

Over my four years, I had the privilege of taking a few courses with Prof. Pruitt, which were all wonderful, but this course in particular epitomised the ways in which I got a better education at Bard than I could have gotten at any other institution. My education at Bard is an important part of who I am, and I would go as far as to say that I can trace some of that back to conversations with Prof. Pruitt and Prof. Weaver.

Yours,

Jun-Dai Bates-Kobashigawa '01

COLLEAGUES

John Pruitt walked the paths of our college and our educational vision with a calm dignity. His academic home was the film department which was from time to time populated by the more flamboyant members of our faculty domain. John was the counter weight. He was a normally quiet man who was attentive and caring about the perspectives around him. He was able to evince strong ideas but always within the scope of collegueship. He did many things in almost forty years of service for us all and he did all that he was called upon to do well and with some amount of calm and careful thinking. He could speak his mind with clarity and force but always with respectful engagement. John once served our college for a short while as an associate academic dean and while he did the tasks with even handedness he I think knew that such service took him away from the day to day student enterprise and confines he so enjoyed. Engagement with the array of interests that exist in a liberal arts college was at the center of his place on our faculty. When something was going on John was in attendance and it all seemed so enjoyable to him. He had an understated but remarkable sense of good humor about our enterprise. He could laugh heartedly about the unusual but likable antics of Adolfas Mekas who chaired his department with flaire. And when it came the moment to bring others to join our enterprise he did not suffer the worry of competition. He just wanted what was enriching for our students with whom his friendship patterns were strong and giving.

Our academic life called upon him to serve in many ways. This committee or that seeking to add a thoughtful presence often called upon him to serve and to guide. A body of faculty seeking to innovate who needed to know where and how to bring about advancement called upon his strong sense of purpose and his calm demeanor. He continued to do that which was his favorite task - to teach his students the history of his discipline. And this he did that to the very end of his life. People enter and leave our place with some rapidity these days and the startling expansiveness of our enterprise is much to be admired. John never retreated from such and was constantly I believe proud of all accomplishment because it served well our young people. Growth often brings artificial separation of disciplines and even people. That was not John's way and for this and all he did in service to Bard he will be missed. I am so very much saddened by the loss of our still very young and remaining youthful colleague.

Stuart Levine

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