

Long Live the People's Film Department



From 1989-1993, I was part of a ragtag collective of aspiring artists who worked under the guidance of Adolfas Mekas, Peter Hutton, and John Pruitt. We were the People's Film Department of Bard College, and they were our id, ego, and superego. Or, as my nerd friends and I called them, the Kirk, Spock, and McCoy.

Peter was the cool, steady, down-to-earth guy. Adolfas was the no-filter, lovable grouch. John was the outwardly stuffy one who rarely showed much emotion. They'd all been there for years, running the program out of a crowded little basement in Preston Hall.

I knew and admired all three, but I was a film history major, so I worked primarily with John, who taught those classes and was also my faculty adviser. Adolfas died in 2011, Peter in 2016. John was our last link to the old crew.

And now, he's gone, too, on June 28, 2019. He'd had brain cancer for several years. He was only 66.

I spoke to him about a year ago, when I was at Bard for my reunion. We hadn't been able to find each other in the massive post-graduation party crowd, so a phone call had to suffice. He sounded tired, and mentioned that he wasn't driving, but gave no indication that he was seriously ill.

We chatted for about 20 minutes, and he was, as always, curious about my life and career. He proudly shared what his wife and two daughters had accomplished in the time since we'd last talked. We exchanged a couple of emails in the following weeks, and that was that.

He kept teaching right up until last semester, because that was what he did. The department had grown larger and more sophisticated over the years, and no longer carried its unofficial populist nickname (Adolfas' idea – it was really something boring like the Film and Media Studies Department). But John kept building the same foundation for new generations of Bardians.

My time at Bard was well before the streaming/loaded-DVD era, so film school was where you learned about Maya Deren and Dziga Vertov and Andre Bazin. Those Film History 101 classes were no joke, something non-majors sometimes discovered to their horror. It takes dedication to read *two* books by Sergei Eisenstein, and full-blown insanity to finish anything by Stan Brakhage. But those were among the most basic requirements.

When you first met him, John seemed like a caricature of an out-of-touch East Coast intellectual. That wasn't entirely inaccurate, but once you cracked the facade, you discovered how genuinely decent, kind, and witty he was. He and I used to argue all the time – never seriously – as I jabbed at his pretensions and he questioned the

status of my diploma.

I think we understood each other. We definitely entertained each other. I once overheard him telling another student that there were some very good actors in the old Hollywood studio system. As I walked by, I said, "Norma Shearer." That got a big laugh from John (although I'm pretty sure the kid had no idea why).

I remember running into him at a weekend movie at the Old Gym "Student Center" (it really was just a ratty old gym). This would not have been remarkable, except it was a *Godzilla* movie. John pretended not to understand why we were so stunned, but he was also smirking. He knew he was screwing with our expectations. (Although when he was told the classroom podium light made him look like Hawkman, I think he really was confused.)

He could spin off into some weird commentary, then break it up with a Cary Grant impression (he did a pretty good W.C. Fields, too). I seem to recall a little dance in front of the class one time. If I ever find my old notebooks, they will be full of these moments. (And if my friend Josh McDonald ever finds his, there's a cartoon involving Mickey Mouse and Nazi propaganda that I cannot even describe.)

John was the toughest professor I ever had. He always said I was a great student, which is probably why he never gave me an A. He knew I could do better. He pushed and challenged all of us, and we (often grudgingly) respected him for it. Especially when we found out he liked *Godzilla* movies.

I'll never get to tease him about that again. I can't believe how sad that makes me.

Thanks for everything, John – you had no idea how much. Start an epic debate with Peter and Adolfas in the afterlife, and may St. Tula bless us all.



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Features

2 thoughts on “Long Live the People’s Film Department”

1. **benmc47**

says:

July 3, 2019 at 12:13 am

Thanks for articulating all this, Loey. It helps to process it all. I'd forgotten about the Hawkman thing, even though that informed the “Hapless Force” comic I was trying to write with Josh for a while. I hadn't seen John for years and years (maybe since you graduated?), but I remember you telling me he had a laugh when you told him the title of my film “My Mise En Scene is Tingling” which makes me feel kind of proud.

2. **benmc47**

says:

July 3, 2019 at 9:19 am

Reblogged this on Blue Towel Productions and commented:

I heard the sad news recently that John Pruitt recently passed away. He was a professor at Bard College, where I studied film back in the late 80's / early 90's. I have a lot of appreciation for him and also for his main two contemporaries in the department, who also have both died in the last decade. My classmate and friend Loey, who was closer to John than I was, wrote up this tribute to him and to the department.

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