

## Education & Theatre

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### Editorial - TEN-Gr members remember

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## Tribute to JOHN SOMERS

His legacy, memories and stories  
from people who knew him

Someone handed the box to Tony as he sat in a Welsh pub. Sharon and Tony opened the box slowly, almost ritualistically, and began to take out objects one by one in front of our eyes. A pen was passed over a long rope, a pair of glasses with a string attached. Those of us who knew him understood that John was above all a practical man, and that he kept his basic tools with him at all times. His notebook: "Talk to graduate students about choosing research instead of internships..." "Write the grant application for the foreign student..." A piece of carved beech wood. We recognise the objects. We mentally travel to John's office for a moment and imagine him writing an article, proofreading a paper, organising the dance in the barn at Payhembury. The emotion and sadness are momentarily replaced by smiles and memories.

This compound stimulus completes a cycle of decades of exploration and storytelling through objects collected in a container. "Start small: take a shoebox", he advised us when we were trying to collect objects to use as prompts for a drama workshop. And what could be more fitting than for Sharon Muiruri Coyne, director and artistic director of the Vita Nova group, and Tony Gee, puppeteer, trainer and writer, old students of his, to unfold his life through one last "compound stimulus" of his so familiar personal belongings in front of a small crowd gathered in person or online for a final farewell.

The year 2024 has left the drama education community poorer with the passing of John Somers. For many of us he was an inspiration, an advocate, a mentor, a teacher, a fellow traveller in difficult times and a tireless champion of the notion that ideas, theories, practices and research should be shared, exchanged, multiplied and strengthened. Members of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) had the honour of meeting him in the early days of the association, in the 1990s, and received all the love, support and encouragement every step of the way. John supported the nomination of TENet-Gr to IDEA and spoke highly of the potential of the association at the 2004 General Council Meeting in Ottawa, Canada; as a result, TENet-Gr has since become a full member of IDEA for Greece. He participated in all the first conferences with presentations, workshops and pre-conference seminars in different cities in Greece. He networked many of us, brought us together to join forces and was always there to share thoughts and ideas. And something that those of us who had even the slightest written contact with him will remember: he replied to all messages within minutes! For an academic who divided his professional time between the university, teaching, research, editing his own journal, organising his international conferences, his community theatre and meetings around the world, this is something truly unique.

Over the years, John generously shared his knowledge, experience and ideas with TENet-Gr, of which he was an honorary member. He insisted on the creation of a journal focusing on theatre/drama in education, something that was lacking in Greece in the distant year 2000. He was an active member of the Academic-Advisory Committee of this journal for almost 20 years, offering advice, guidance and all kinds of help. He provided expertise and content, and saw the journal grow, get organised and stand on its own two feet.

*Education & Theatre* is what it is today in part because of his perseverance. As a modest tribute, this year's issue includes a supplement dedicated to John Somers. Senior members of TENet-Gr who had the pleasure of meeting him in person and attending one of his workshops share brief, spontaneous recollections as well as photographs documenting moments spent with him. Nikos Govas compiles a list of the writings that John so generously contributed to our association's research and publications.

In the Viewpoint column, Yi-Man Au, a facilitator, drama educator and researcher, brings together memories and incidents, events and activities from John's life and work in a text that, although subjective, reflects the shared experience of many students on the MA Applied Drama course at the University of Exeter, UK. This personal narrative reflects his work as an academic, facilitator, director, collaborator, teacher and mentor.

One of the great qualities of John Somers was his power to multiply ideas, to inspire and empower those in the field who knew him, individually and collectively, to experiment and advance their work in breadth and depth. This is the common denominator that all the people we contacted to write about him returned to. In a kind of group interview, Eirini Marna, a teacher and student of John's, asked the question: "How do you feel your work has been influenced by meeting John?" She received answers from Helen Nickolson and Joe Winston of Royal Holloway, University of London, and Warwick University, respectively, the people who took over the management and coordination of *Research in Drama Education*, the first academic journal in drama education (and still the most influential in the field), after his retirement in 2005. In addition, academics from different parts of the world respond to how their work and teaching are still influenced today, multiplying John's ideas and approach through their strategic positions: Hala Rashed Al-Yamani (Bethlehem University, Palestine), Shu-hwa Jung (Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan), Ha Young Hwang (Korea National University of Arts, South Korea) and Marios Koukounaras-Liagkis (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Finally, Nikos Govas (Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network, Greece), Maria Depta, Alicja Jaskulska and Aldona Żejmo-Kudelska (Drama Way Foundation, Poland), Zeki Özen (Contemporary Drama Association, Turkey) refer to the support they have received for the creation and sustainability of active theatre/drama in education networks in different parts of the world.

The tribute concludes with the reproduction of his iconic article entitled "Narrative, Drama and the Compound Stimulus", first published in TENet-Gr's tenth anniversary special issue (Issue 9, 2008). In this article, John presented in a clear and concise way the logic and methodology of the well-known "compound stimulus", a tool for the initial stages of drama workshops.

The *Education & Theatre* journal bids farewell to our dear friend.

The Editorial Board

## Members remember

**I**t was like he was dancing; everything. When I watched him, the word I would use is "rhythm." He was present in everything he did, he believed in it so much. Generosity, childishness, enthusiasm, love, commitment, dance.

Jenny Karaviti

**T**he first image that comes to mind when I think of John Somers is him walking into a workshop with a mysterious smile on his face, holding a... shoebox from which he is slowly taking out various seemingly unrelated small objects that will soon be magically transformed in his hands into tools for a creative drama lesson.

Nikos Govas

**I**remember the directness, the sincerity and the depth in his eyes; his body moving gracefully as he introduced you to a world to be explored. Inspiration, elevation, soul and method all at once. A man full of life, with all the virtues that go with it. A teacher. Unforgettable.

George Mardas

**T**eacher, I have seen in you the magnificence of kindness, of simplicity and of availability.

Dina Tsolaki

### EDUCATION & THEATRE JOURNAL



Issue 1 (2001) Drama in Education: What teachers and students do

Issue 2 (2002) Theory & practice in drama education (in Greek)

Issue 3 (2003) "Community theatre" in rural Devon: An alternative model (in Greek)

Issue 3 (2003) Discovering seminal stories: Community theatre as cultural memory - The Exwick project

Issue 4 (2004) The effectiveness of one in-service education of teachers course for influencing teachers' practice (with Eva Sikorova)

Issue 9 (2008) Narrative, drama and the compound stimulus (special edition - 10 years Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network)

Issue 19 (2018) The affect and effect of drama on my life (special edition - 20 years Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network)



He was the one who showed me where to find the words to speak about my world; he opened up my horizons and lit the spark; direct, human, he combined knowledge with solidarity and humility; he was my mentor.

Nassia Choleva

A very specific image... his face, his smile! Very communicative, giving, warm! He loved what he did!

Maria Rebouskou

I don't think I'll ever forget the faces, bodies and looks of the people who attended John's workshop at the 5th International Theatre/Drama & Education Conference in 2006. We stood in the large sports hall, silent and misty-eyed, having felt on our skin all the magic of the ritual that he unfolded step by step from the first hour of the workshop in his unique way, with the passion and energy of a teenager! Just as I will never forget the belly dance we did in Mouria! An unforgettable experience!

Hara Tsoukala

There was a youthful energy in the movement of his hands and face. His generosity – the first week of classes he invited us to his house and we shared food and folk tales. You always felt that what you were doing had value.

Eirini Marna

John Somers, thank you so much! You have made my 35 years working in the school system brighter, happier, more satisfying, more creative and more effective!

Paschalia Michalopoulou

#### PROCEEDINGS OF CONFERENCES ON THEATRE/DRAMA IN EDUCATION HELD IN ATHENS

1st International Conference, *Searching for the place of theatre in secondary education* (2000, published in Greek)

- Drama in Education: What teachers and students do (keynote speech – short version published in Issue 1 of the *Education & Theatre* journal)

- Entering fictional worlds (workshop description)

2nd International Conference, *Theatre in Education: Art form and learning tool* (2001)

- Theatre meets education: Attitude and behaviour change through dramatic experience (paper)

- Entering fictional worlds (workshop description)

- Developing deeper narratives in drama (workshop description)

3rd International Conference: *Theatre in education: Building bridges* (2003)

- The therapy of drama (keynote speech)

- Entering fictional worlds: The use of drama in schools (workshop description)

- Developing performance from Drama in Education work (workshop description)

5th International Conference, *Creating new roles for the 21st century* (2006)

- Drama and ritual (workshop description)

- Combining the arts: How music, visual art, dance and drama can work together as equals (workshop description)

6th International Conference, *Theatre and education at centre stage* (2009)

- Theatre as communal work: Intervention in rural communities (paper)

- The relationship between DiE (Drama in Education) and performance (paper)

7th International Conference, *Theatre and Education: bonds of solidarity* (2012, bilingual edition)

- Drama in schools: Making the educational and artistic argument for its inclusion, retention and development (paper)