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### Viewpoint - In loving memory of my dearest teacher John Somers

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## In loving memory of my dearest teacher **John Somers**

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When you spend your lifetime remembering a person, how that person lived becomes the most important imprint on your heart. Professor John Somers was the first mentor to introduce me to the world of drama education. In the more than twenty years I knew him, he not only shared his passion for imparting knowledge and his scholarly demeanour, but more importantly, he personally showed me what a complete, whole person looks like.

In 2000, I boldly wrote to him, a complete stranger, in the hope of enrolling on the Applied Theatre Master's course he was supervising. He strongly recommended that the department admit me, a student with an underwhelming undergraduate record, and from then on, we formed a lifelong teacher-student bond.

As I write this tribute to him, my mind is flooded with vivid and profound snippets of our multifaceted interactions.

John was a gentle person who was quick to see the needs of others and offer comfort. As a young girl from overseas, I felt an immense sense of warmth from him. I remember when I first arrived in Exeter, there was one time after class when I was homesick and tearful. He approached me quietly, took me for a walk in his big soft hand and listened intently. He invited our entire class to this house for dinner and introduced us to his family, making us feel at home. Each week in class, he would have fresh eggs from his home on the desk, which gave me a sense of delight and coziness – I had never had a teacher who would give such a gift to their students.

John was a natural connector and always supportive of his students. Even before I enrolled, and throughout my studies, he introduced me to seniors and peers from various cohorts and regions, many of whom have since become my closest friends and family. After graduation, he connected me with applied theatre practitioners around the world, placing me in this big community to continue my development. Every year, he would send me a handmade Christmas card with a self-portrait photo from his

teaching journey, which became an annual touch point for our connection.

John was a rare and wonderful friend. He brought a delightful sense of humour to the theatre games, always making each game more fun and engaging for everyone. His gentle, deep singing voice would linger and resonate long after he had sung or harmonised with us.

John was a citizen deeply committed to his community. As we walked together, he would often bend down to pick up litter from the ground, as naturally as he would clean his own home.

John would write important reminders on the back of his hand. Since I met him in 2001, I have unconsciously taken up this little habit of his that has continued for over 20 years. Seeing the writing on my own hand makes me feel his presence, and this unintended passing on of a practice has become a lifelong bond.

How a person behaves and relates to others is a key entry point for commemoration. In his contributions to applied theatre, John embodied gentleness, connection, partnership and benevolence.

He often talked about how he first got into teaching drama. He said that one day, as he was wandering the hallways of the College of Education trying to decide on a specialisation, he saw a classroom with people sitting in a circle, a teaching format he had never seen before that promoted equal respect in learning. He was immediately captivated and never looked back from drama education.

He immersed himself deeply in learning, practising and exploring theatre from schools to communities, children to the elderly, the artistry and practicality, the applications and theories of applied drama. John was a great founder in bringing people in the field together. He founded the MA in Applied Drama at the University of Exeter, a rare course that combined the teaching of drama in both school and community contexts; he was the founding director of the triennial Exeter Applied Drama Research Conference, which attracts researchers from all over the



world and is one of the three major academic conferences in the field, but the only one held regularly in Exeter; he founded *Research in Drama Education*, which has been the leading international journal in the field since 1996. All these endeavours were designed to bring people and their practices together more effectively, to link them in closer partnerships, to enable mutual visibility and dialogue, and to share and refine the work.

John's benevolence towards the community was also deeply manifested in his work in modelling and developing a form of interactive theatre that effectively engages audiences and communities. In 2003, he received the Lin Wright Special Recognition Award from the American Alliance of Theatre and Education. In 2005, his major interactive theatre creation *On the Edge* won multiple awards from the National Institute of Mental Health in England (NIMHE). This work focused on the issue of mental health, with over 120 performances reaching 5,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 22, raising their awareness of early stage psychosis through a combination of theatre performance and subsequent classroom interaction. This is a strong evidence-based practice that an applied theatre practitioner should be aware of.

As Artistic Director of the Tale Valley Community Theatre, John created and produced over 12 innovative community theatre productions in the East Devon community. His theatre company had actively developed a model for sharing theatre-making skills in communities. John valued people's memories and community stories, and connected with people by narrating the stories of the communities in which they lived. His annual community theatre productions repeatedly demonstrated how engaging community members in theatre-making could create social capital for the community. In 2007, he mobilised over 200 people aged 3 to 87 in his own community of Payhembury to perform *Foresight*, a historical story of their community, which is now a classic case study of community theatre in practice. The Award for Leadership in Community-Based Theatre and Civic Engagement, presented by the American Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in 2014, is a fitting recognition of his lifelong contribution to community theatre.

His achievements in the field are well documented and you can find more information about him and his published work online. And I am sure that my fellow colleagues who worked with John in different parts of the world, particularly in Poland, Taiwan, Greece, the Czech Republic and Turkey, will have more stories to tell about John. Mine is just one of many and I am grateful to have shared memories of John with them.

Finally, as a student of the beloved John Somers, I have not wasted my mentor's teachings. On the morning of the 15th of March 2024 UK time (afternoon in Hong Kong), I received the news of his passing while teaching a drama class to my students. Although I knew that life has its limits, I still felt deep sadness and reluctance. But then I realised that he would be proud of me – 25 years after becoming his student, I am still carrying on the applied drama work he taught me, with unwavering commitment.

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**Yi-Man Au** holds a PhD (Graduate School of Education from the University of Melbourne, Australia) and an MA in Applied Drama (University of Exeter, UK). She is an applied theatre practitioner, trainer and researcher. Her work and research interests include applied theatre creation and aesthetics, drama curriculum design, adult education, trainer/teacher/teaching artist training, NGO capacity building, community theatre and educational theatre performance. She was a co-chair of the Academic Committee at the 6th International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) World Congress held in Hong Kong, an external reviewer for the Applied Theatre and Drama Education Professional Diploma Course at the Hong Kong Art School and a member of the Arts Education Advisory Group for the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (2017–2019). She is currently an Executive Director of the Hong Kong Drama/Theatre and Education Forum (TEFO), a part-time lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Drama and Theatre Education in Asia* (DaTEAsia) and a co-opted member of the Art Form Sub-Committee (Community) under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.