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About John Somers, an influential and generous drama teacher -

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About **John Somers**, an **influential** and **generous drama teacher**

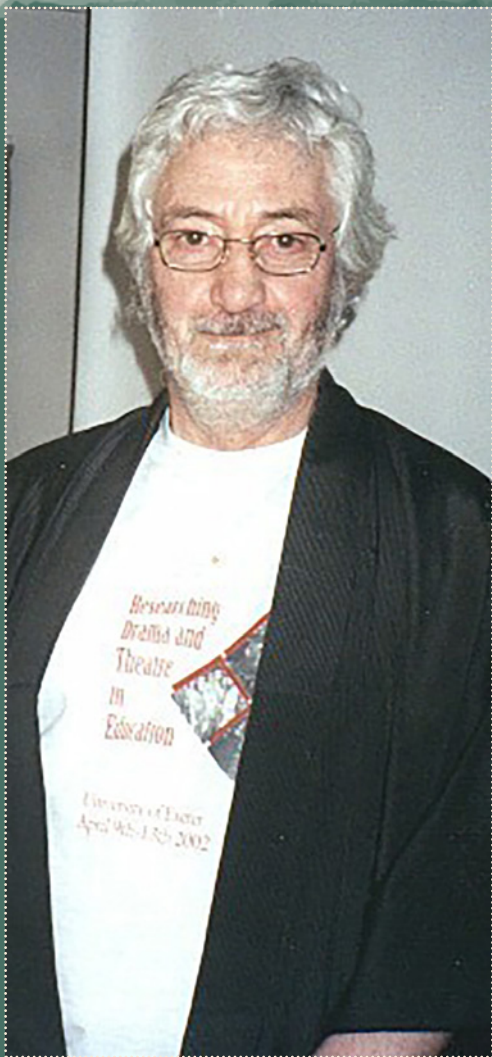
Conversations with **Eirini Marna**

The loss of a person opens up the powerful field of memory and connects those who knew them. Such is the case with the loss of John Somers. He was a drama teacher, director of the MA in Applied Drama at the University of Exeter in the UK, editor and founder of the journal *Research in Drama Education*, an inspiring facilitator of drama workshops and community theatre and a researcher in drama education. John Somers was a drama teacher who influenced the research, practice and dissemination of drama education from the UK, Brazil, China and South Korea to Palestine, Turkey, Poland and Greece. He was interested in drama education programmes in far-flung countries as well as in community theatre in his home town of Payhembury in the county of Devon.

To honour his memory, we asked some of his students and colleagues from different parts of the world to tell us how meeting him has changed them, both personally and professionally. We also sought to capture his impact on the wider drama community worldwide. Bellow, Helen Nicholson and Joe Winston from the UK share their thoughts on their work with *Research in Drama Education*, the key academic journal in drama education that John founded in the 1990s; also contributing are former students of his who, through their university positions, now act as leaders and multipliers of his vision: Hala Rashed Al-Yamani from Palestine, Shu-hwa Jung from Taiwan, Ha Young Hwang from Korea and Marios Koukounaras-Liagkis from Greece. In other cases, John's presence, both through his expertise and his personal contribution, helped to establish or expand theatre/drama associations or collectives. Testimony to his influence is provided by Maria Depta, Alicja Jaskulska and Aldona Żejmo-Kudelska, John's former students from Poland, Zeki Özen from Turkey and Nikos Govas from Greece.

All these great professionals, who inspire, teach and mentor young students and in-service educators and conduct research, were happy to share their thoughts, memories and stories of John Somers, answering to the following questions:

- *How has John's work, energy and approach influenced you personally and professionally?*
- *How influential has John Somers been in the field of drama education in your country?*



John and research (Research in Drama Education journal)

John Somers was a man with a vision; he firmly believed in the power of drama and theatre to change lives and inspire communities. Most of us who work in this sector – whether as teachers, artists, therapists and academics – would agree with this sentiment, but few of us possess the kind of exceptional skills and energy that bring people together as researchers and pedagogues with John’s generosity of spirit. Sharing knowledge was important to John, and this was evident when I met him at the first conference he chaired at Exeter University in 1995. It was an inspiring event, and I was honoured when he invited me to serve on the editorial board of a new academic journal he was founding in 1996: *Research in Drama Education (RiDE)*. In his first editorial, he described his ambition for a research community that included different aspects of drama education. In John’s words, “We expect the journal to celebrate the variety of forms in which drama and theatre serve educational purpose around the world”. At the time, there was no academic journal of quality dedicated to drama education, so this shed much needed light on the field. He fully approved when the board agreed, under my co-editorship with Joe Winston, to add *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* to the journal’s title, but in truth it was always eclectic and inclusive of many different practices across community and educational theatres. This was John’s vision.

John’s legacy and impact on the research field is immense. The journal he founded thrives today, and is read by thousands of students, researchers and academics. This is in no small measure due to the way in which he established the journal, and it is testament to his view that research matters, and that healthy debate is creative and productive. I was proud to learn from John Somers, and I pay tribute to his defining contribution as founding editor of *RiDE* – one of his many achievements – and to his warmth, wisdom and kindness.

Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway,
University of London; Editorial board (1996–2024), Co-editor (2005–2014),
Research in Drama Education



I will always recall John Somers as a man infused with a deep love for drama education and a great believer in its intrinsic benefits in the education of young people. I got to know him when I worked in Devon schools, first as a deputy head and later as a headteacher. My later professional career at Warwick University owes a great deal to him. He wrote the reference that helped me get an interview and then offered me a place on the board of *RiDE* in its very early stages. Later, he was external examiner for the Warwick MA in Drama and Theatre Education, the practical structure of which was in no small way inspired by his own thriving Master’s degree at Exeter. As editor of *RiDE* and convener of the Exeter Conference, his influence on the international development of drama education was seminal, particularly in helping to establish it as a discipline of study with a serious research base. In doing so, he was always keen to be inclusive and took active measures to encourage educators from the developing world to be able to afford to attend and contribute. It is perhaps as a gifted and energetic teacher that many readers of this journal will remember him. He was ceaseless in his holistic support of his students, caring for their well-being and happiness as well as their intellectual development. He had a deep commitment to his work with overseas students and a profound love for Greece and its people. He is sorely missed by so many worldwide.

Joe Winston, Professor Emeritus of Drama and Theatre Education,
University of Warwick; Co-editor of **Research in Drama Education** (2005–2015)



Multiplying John's work in academia: Teaching future drama teachers

Memory is very important for people because it helps them to make sense of their personal past experiences and to tell stories, especially about those that have had a strong impact on their lives. These stories determine how a person sees themselves and others.

John Somers was one of the people I had the honour of meeting while working on my PhD at the University of Exeter. He also collaborated with us at Bethlehem University, visiting to conduct a series of training workshops with BU students, pre-service and in-service teachers.

He was one of the academics who strongly influenced my professional vision, approach, skills and attitudes.

When I recall my past experiences with John, I immediately picture a person who was full of life, energy, knowledge, wisdom, humour and enthusiasm.

He believed strongly in drama education as a good learning and teaching process. The various academic and practical drama experiences I have gone through have created this deep understanding of the importance of creative pedagogies such as drama and theatre for us Palestinians living under occupation, especially the most recent and harshest Israeli occupation. This occupation has had a negative impact on our daily lives and has contributed to the dominance of traditional ways of life and approaches to teaching and learning.

My experiences with him have broadened and deepened my understanding of the power of drama and the performing arts in education to provide students with what Somers described as "a third space that is exploring issues on physical, emotional and social levels, but in a dynamic way" to delve into different life experiences, whether individually or collaboratively in small and large groups, and to discover themselves and become much more aware of themselves and the world around them. From his role as a model in leading the various sessions, I understood my role as a facilitator in working with a group of people.

All these experiences have helped me in my professional life at Bethlehem University. I have therefore worked on integrating applied drama into my various courses. I have also worked with colleagues to develop courses and use creative and active teaching methods. I had the opportunity to establish the Drama Society at Bethlehem University, and we worked on developing performances based on community and street theatre, where the students played an active role in selecting and developing the whole project of the performance.

Recently, I have been working with a number of colleagues to develop an MA programme called Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices. It is aimed at anyone interested in developing their professional skills. Students on the programme will experience first-hand creative pedagogies (arts in education: visual and performing, including music, drama and theatre in education), methods and techniques that will enhance their learning and develop their skills.

John Somers has physically passed away and left our world, but his spirit, thoughts, beliefs, principles and positions will continue to live and spread throughout our world, and in my opinion that is eternity.

Hala Rashed Al-Yamani, Bethlehem University, Palestine



The grandmaster mapping the landscape of drama education

In October 1999, I went to the UK to continue my studies at the Drama Department of the University of Exeter. I was fortunate to meet my mentor, Professor John Somers, who introduced me to the field of applied drama. Both the theoretical research and the practical application opened my eyes to the value of drama in a liberal education, so I focused on the study and practice of theatre in education.

John's working methods and attitudes influenced me greatly. When I completed my PhD and returned to Taiwan, I taught at Taipei National University of the Arts. Theatre in Education, Applied Drama, Sociology of Theatre and Community are my main teaching subjects. My teaching approach is very similar to John's, integrating teaching, research, and practice. As a result, graduate students have followed me into juvenile detention centres for teaching and research,

into middle schools for practical theatre in education projects and into narrative theatre interactions with the elderly through drama.

John was always concerned about the state of drama education in my country. He was like a map-drawer of drama around the world. Many of his students are working diligently in the field of drama education in Taiwan, some teaching drama in formal schools, others interacting with communities or specific groups through applied drama. Meanwhile, I continue to have a subtle influence through teaching, research and practice at the university.



Shu-hwa Jung,

Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan



Remembering John Somers

I met John Somers in the summer of 2000, before I started my MA in Applied Drama with him at Exeter. At the time, he was directing a community play, *Parson Terry's Dinner and Other Stories*, to celebrate the turn of the millennium in Payhembury, the village to which his family and he belonged. The production took place in different parts of the village, telling stories of different times in Payhembury between 1650 and 1943, and children and adults from the community were all cast in the performance. It was such a sensational and thought-provoking experience for me because of the way in which it highlighted the vivid connection between drama/theatre and life, and also because of the incredible participation of villagers with sheer joy, passion and humour. John's presence was behind every scene and his genuine interest in working with people shone through. It was also his enthusiasm for both practice and research, which was clearly evident in the project, that led me to become involved in this area of study.

Teaching on a postgraduate programme in Korea, I continue to cultivate the dynamic relationship between practice and research as part of John's legacy. Whether I am teaching site-specific performance or theatre in education, I believe that insights for me and my students always come from the experience of practice. Such insights are in the flesh and inevitably breathe like living creatures. My approach owes much to John, who taught me the courage to engage in practice and research in a symbiotic relationship. Research can be alive, as if it could breathe in and out, and practice gains momentum to develop in its own intelligent way.

What resonates strongly with me is John's practice of immediacy and transparency. He was such a courageous practitioner in that he was not afraid to push boundaries. He would just do it! He was also such a humane, generous teacher who cared for his students with his positive will. I find myself driving for my students to their practice sites in Korea with my car full of their handmade props and objects. And I tell my students, "My teacher used to do that for me too".

Ha Young Hwang,
*Korea National University of Arts,
South Korea*



I will tell you exactly how I feel about John Somers and I will back it up with our history and, of course, with his work and his influence on my work. He changed the trajectory of my life, quite frankly. My encounter with John as a person and with his work at a conference in Thessaloniki in November 2005 was the starting point for me to make big decisions, to get to know him and to work with him. It was also the beginning of a path that has led me to be a university professor today, following in the footsteps of John Somers. I will explain as briefly as possible what happened.

A friend from Corfu – I had just been appointed as a teacher of theology in formal education – urged me to attend the conference organised by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) in Thessaloniki. It was a Sunday and I found myself unsuspectingly exposed to the lightning storm of John Somers, who spoke about the dynamics of drama education and showed a video of a drama in education project with autistic children. In addition, Persephone Sextou and Maria Lourou discussed a theatre in education project about road accidents on the island of Chios, where there had been fatalities due to motorcycle racing. I had never imagined that education could be so liberating, transforming and transfiguring. I saw before me a man who was changing the world and he had a method. He knew how to do it. This opened a wide window for me to change my personal educational paradigm, and a research idea was born. At that time, John stressed the need for research into the impact of drama education. I remember him saying that we need to study the shadow of the "bird of art" while it is still flying close to the earth, but also the "bird of art" itself. This idea was fixed in my mind that day: to study drama in education in depth and to highlight its transformative and multifaceted dynamics. In the end, I approached John, but what could I tell him? Stunned, I just mumbled, "Congratulations! Amazing". Still, I dared to ask TENet-Gr members to attend John's 5-day seminar, but there was no availability. They asked me if I was a drama education practitioner and I said, "No, but I'm doing a PhD!"

So, I returned home enlightened and determined to do a PhD. I had found a teacher and also the people at TENet-Gr like Jenny, Nikos and Dina, to name a few, who were at first cautious, thinking that the cobbler should stick to his last, but eventually supported me and put me in touch with the teacher. And John left no point, no moment, no place, no question, no idea that he did not embrace and illuminate. It was him who introduced me to people, literature and ideas. He wrote to me constantly to clarify any question, to help me with anything I needed, to illuminate any path my research and study took, simply because he loved drama education and research. And he was not even on my seven-member PhD committee. We would meet in Thessaloniki, go to seminars and conferences, eat and drink, laugh and be sad, always as a teacher with his student. That is who he was. A minister of learning, a unique seeker of truth, a rational revolutionary of change, a father of love and giving, and above all a great teacher who dared. Our model and our guide!

Marios Koukounaras-Liagkis,
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

John and field work: Empowering theatre/drama associations

It was 13 July 2000, when I received his first email. We were introduced by Maria Lourou (his MA student) and Eleni Papanzoglou. We immediately started exchanging messages about drama (at that time I was not sure how to translate it into Greek), the role of the arts in schools, the need for teacher training, etc. And of course, I invited him to the 1st International Conference on Theatre/Drama & Education that the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) would organise in Athens in December of that year.

Since then, our collaboration was continuous and frequent. He came to Greece many times to attend conferences, seminars, lectures, celebrations and parties. Each time, we would have conversations – usually in a tavern over a glass of wine – about teacher training (he often mentioned the need for organised support), about the different versions of drama or theatre (in/for) education, about community theatre (which was probably his favourite) and about the content of university studies, especially the MA in Applied Drama that he had designed at the University of Exeter. He always spoke highly of the students from Greece who went to Exeter to do the MA and the high quality projects they designed (one of TENet-Gr's earlier projects called "Escapes" grew out of such work done by Maria Lourou, Gianna Pitouli and Christina Mouratidou for the MA with John Somers).

John Somers was multifaceted, versatile, a traveller and a reveller, inventive and innovative (everyone remembers him coming to seminars with his favourite "shoebox" – which was described as a "compound stimulus" – from which he would take out the most unexpected objects to stimulate us to enter, as he said, "imaginary worlds" and start a new drama lesson).

For TENet-Gr, he was one of the first and most influential teachers and inspirers. It is an honour that he accepted to be our association's first honorary member. John Somers paved the way for many of us. A generous teacher, a friend, it is a great pleasure for me to have known him.



Nikos Govas, *theatre pedagogue,*
Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network, Greece



In the mid-1990s Mrs. Jadwiga Królikowska who was an academic and a lecturer at the University of Warsaw began to work with John Somers, seeing the potential of the drama method applied to educational, preventive and social rehabilitation work. This collaboration resulted in annual drama workshops and the opportunity for students to participate in international drama conferences. In addition, some of the students were able to take advantage of Erasmus scholarships and attend the MA course in Applied Drama at the University of Exeter, run by John Somers. It is worth noting that Poland at the time was a post-communist country in the midst of intense socio-political change, formally outside the European Union, in a poor economic situation. Understanding this reality and showing a great empathy, John ran many workshops pro bono, helped us to get discounts on conference fees and financial support. From the outset, his commitment to the development of drama in Poland went far beyond a standard partnership between two universities. The graduates of the scholarship programmes and other participants of John's workshops founded the first drama association in Poland in 2002, called The Association of Drama Practitioners STOP-KLATKA. With John's great support in terms of content and organisation, members of the association carried out drama projects in educational centres, prisons and schools on topics such as human rights, bullying, violence prevention and mental health problems among teenagers. At the same time, following John's advice, they built up and integrated the community of drama practitioners in Poland by organising open workshops on the method and conferences. Today, community theatre is very well known in Poland, associated with John Somers and practised by facilitators from Krakow, Warsaw and Gdańsk – from the sea to the mountains.



When we think about John's legacy, we believe that one of the most important things he has left us (which seems particularly important today) is the belief that we can work and create together, despite our differences. People who have had the experience of working with him always find something in common, and it is not just a memory of having met John, but a specific sense of a deep existential experience.

**Maria Depta, Alicja Jaskulska
and Aldona Żejmo-Kudelska,**
*Drama Way Foundation for Education and Culture,
Warsaw; Community Theatre Project, Supraśl, Poland*



John Somers: A warm, friendly, sincere, wise drama companion

John Somers contributed to the development of drama studies in Turkey by offering new perspectives and was always loved by the participants of his workshops. The international conferences organised by the Contemporary Drama Association (Çağdaş Drama Derneği) since 1985 have aimed to integrate international developments and new approaches into drama studies in the country. To this end, field experts from different countries have conducted workshops at these international conferences. John Somers supported these conferences more than once in cities such as Ankara, Kocaeli, Istanbul, Antalya and Bursa, passing on all his wisdom to the drama participants as if he were a family member. He introduced the role card technique to the Turkish drama world and gave details on its use. Role cards were found to be very practical and effective by drama practitioners and were used frequently because of the dramatic structure they provided. In fact, the technique was directly included in the curriculum of the Contemporary Drama Association, which is recognised by the Turkish Ministry of National Education.

One of the lifetime achievement awards given by the Contemporary Drama Association to drama pioneers from around the world who have contributed to the development of drama in Turkey was presented to John Somers.

In the years that followed, John Somers introduced practitioners to the interactive theatre approach of applied theatre, enabling them to gain a whole new perspective. He sincerely taught his drama friends how to think, how to create a story, how to use personal material to understand and analyse the character and how to bring theatre and drama together in an organic way.

Whatever date or city John Somers ran the workshop in, they all had one thing in common. His smiling face, his boundless energy, his patience and his wisdom. I have personally had the opportunity to interact with him in his workshops, sometimes as a participant, sometimes as a translator and sometimes as a representative of the organising entity. Whatever the role, I learned a lot each time.

The conversations between the workshops, the feedback he sent after each event and the projects he carefully designed allowed for a sophisticated development of a country's understanding of drama.

I will never forget what he said during one of his workshops: "A drama teacher should also be a good storyteller". We will try to tell your story well.

I am glad you were there, I am glad you are still here, John Somers...

Dr Zeki Özen,

Ankara University, and on behalf of the Contemporary Drama Association, Turkey



Eirini Marna is a kindergarten teacher, drama teacher, facilitator and adult trainer. She holds a degree in Preschool Education from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, a postgraduate degree in Applied Drama from the University of Exeter, UK and a DEA in Theatre Studies from the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III, France. She has participated in various training programmes in collaboration with the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network. From 2020 to 2024, she participated as a trainer in the project "Schools for All - Inclusion of Refugee Children in Greek Schools" of the European Wergeland Centre, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and the Institute of Educational Policy. Since 2007 she has been working in public kindergartens and since 2023 she has been supervising the practical and laboratory exercises of the students of the School of Drama at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.