

Coleman A. Jennings 1933 - 2020



JENNINGS, Coleman A Coleman A Jennings, theatre director, professor and former chair of the Theatre and Dance Department at The University of Texas in Austin, died on October 28, 2020. He was born on November 21, 1933 in Granger, Texas. Joining the UT faculty in 1963, he taught and directed plays for young audiences for over fifty years. He discovered his passion for theatre and storytelling as a youth: hearing bedtime stories from his father about Cowboy Slim Jim; seeing traveling tent shows in the summer in Taylor, Texas; making movies with family members and neighborhood children; seeing a UT production about the Brontes that toured the state to perform in Texas high schools; shooting a film as a senior at Taylor High School and attending touring road shows from New York that performed in Congress Avenue theatres in Austin. After earning an associate's degree from Temple Junior College and serving in the US Army Signal Corps, Jennings enrolled as an undergraduate in the Department of Drama at UT in 1955. After graduation he worked as a stage manager in several off-Broadway theatres in New York. Deciding to teach in college, he returned to UT to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in directing and years later he was awarded a Doctorate of Education from New York University. In 1962, he was invited to join the UT drama faculty where he remained until his retirement in 2018. He served as chairman of the department (now the Department of Theatre and Dance) for twelve years from 1980 to 1992. He directed more than 20 plays for youth that were either performed on campus or were toured to area elementary schools. As departmental chair, Jennings aggressively recruited a diverse faculty including Amarante Lucero, Stephen Gerald, Omi Jones, Judy Dearing, Ted Shine and Whitney LeBlanc. Under his leadership the department established several new student scholarships as well as the Theatre for Youth Chair in playwriting. Additional funds from this Chair have also been used to hire and retain talented artists and educators. Jennings received awards from professional educational theatre organizations for his teaching, significant achievements as a director and administrator as well as service to the field. He was extremely proud of the many graduates of the UT theatre studies program in youth theatre who are now teachers, directors, professors, administrators, and producers in community and professional theatres, colleges and community centers throughout the United States. He published nine anthologies of plays for families and young audiences that became important resources for producers, students and teachers in the field. Several are in use as textbooks in colleges throughout the country. With his wife, Lola, he wrote Braille: the Early Life of Louis Braille, a dramatization of Johnny Tremain, from the novel by Esther Forbes and a book about using drama in the classroom for the Texas Educational Agency. He also wrote The Honorable Urashima Taro, a play based on two Japanese folk tales. Upon his retirement from UT, he was celebrated by the department, college and the field in April, 2018, with a two-day symposium on theatre with and for youth. His archive, the Coleman A. Jennings Papers, is housed in the Briscoe Center for American History on the UT campus in Austin. In 2019, Jennings and his wife moved to New York City. He is survived by his wife, Lola Jennings, a son, Coleman C. Jennings (Margo Wickersham), a daughter, Adrienne E. Jennings (Jeffrey Hewitt), two sisters-in-law (Judy Slobig and Jane Kavaloski), six grandchildren and numerous nieces and nephews. A private celebration of his life via the internet is being planned for his family. Gifts in his memory may be sent to The University of Texas, Department of Theatre and Dance, Austin, TX 78712 marked for the Coleman A. Jennings Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Creative Drama and Theatre for Young Audiences.

Published in Austin American-Statesman on Nov. 22, 2020

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