

Sir Patrick Stewart's Tribute to Homer Swander

Professor Homer D. Swander died in Santa Barbara, California, on February 15th, aged 96.

'Murph' Swander, as he was universally known, announced his arrival in my life in the early seventies with a knock on my dressing room door after an evening performance at The Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford on Avon. There he stood, a tall, sunburnt, handsome man who introduced himself in a voice redolent of his early life in Chicago and Michigan. He was in England, he said, leading a group of students and theatre lovers from Southern California, and as he was conducting a teaching session the next morning on the play I had just performed and he had seen, would I come and talk to the group. You don't have to make a speech, he assured me, just answer questions. But, he went on, whatever you have to say about tonight's play, the Stratford season, your love of Shakespeare, and how it all began, we would like to hear it. No, I firmly replied, I don't do that kind of thing. How I work and why I work in Shakespeare is my business and nobody else's. I respect that, he replied, but you must understand that you have a more intimate, complex, unique understanding of Shakespeare and his work than any academic. Those students need to hear what you know, and the benefit to them will be significant. He then pulled a bottle of Johnnie Walker out of a bag and said, we can't pay you but this is yours if you come. Ah, the way to an actor's heart!

The next morning I was there in his temporary classroom, the first of scores of visits I paid to his classes in Stratford, London, and UCSB over two decades. And of course he was right: the students were an eager, attentive group, but the most important lesson I learned that morning was that being invited to analyse, articulate, and delve into the actor's processes illuminated for me aspects of Shakespeare in performance that I had never contemplated before. Revelations exploded in my head.

Three years later, with the RSC actor the late Tony Church, I was setting out with three other RSC colleagues for an eight-week tour of US colleges, bringing into classrooms what Murph described as educational revelations. Actors in Residence (AIR) was born. The tour was an exhausting triumph, which resulted in me falling ill during our final week at the University of Hawaii. I was so excited by the experience I made room for another eight-week tour the following year. Once more with four other RSC actors, including Richard Pasco and Ben Kingsley.

I had to give up this work years ago, but it still continues, for a while known as Alliance for Creative Theatre, Education, and Research (ACTER), and now as Actors from the London Stage (AFTLS) and based at the University of Notre Dame.

Murph was a brilliant and dearly loved friend, who influenced my work on Shakespeare as much as anyone has. He also, though indirectly, changed my career and my life. One evening in 1986 I was assisting a Shakespeare scholar, Professor David Rodes, at a lecture he was giving in Royce Hall, UCLA. Signed up for this course of public lectures was a Hollywood producer, Robert Justman, who was involved in preparing a revival of a new *Star Trek* TV series. He always claimed that at one point in the evening he turned to his wife and said; "We've found the Captain."

Professor Swander's wife, Laura, died a year ago aged 93. They are survived by two children, Michael and Susan, and a grandson, Timothy. A third daughter, Beverley, died several years ago.