



Wynn Handman

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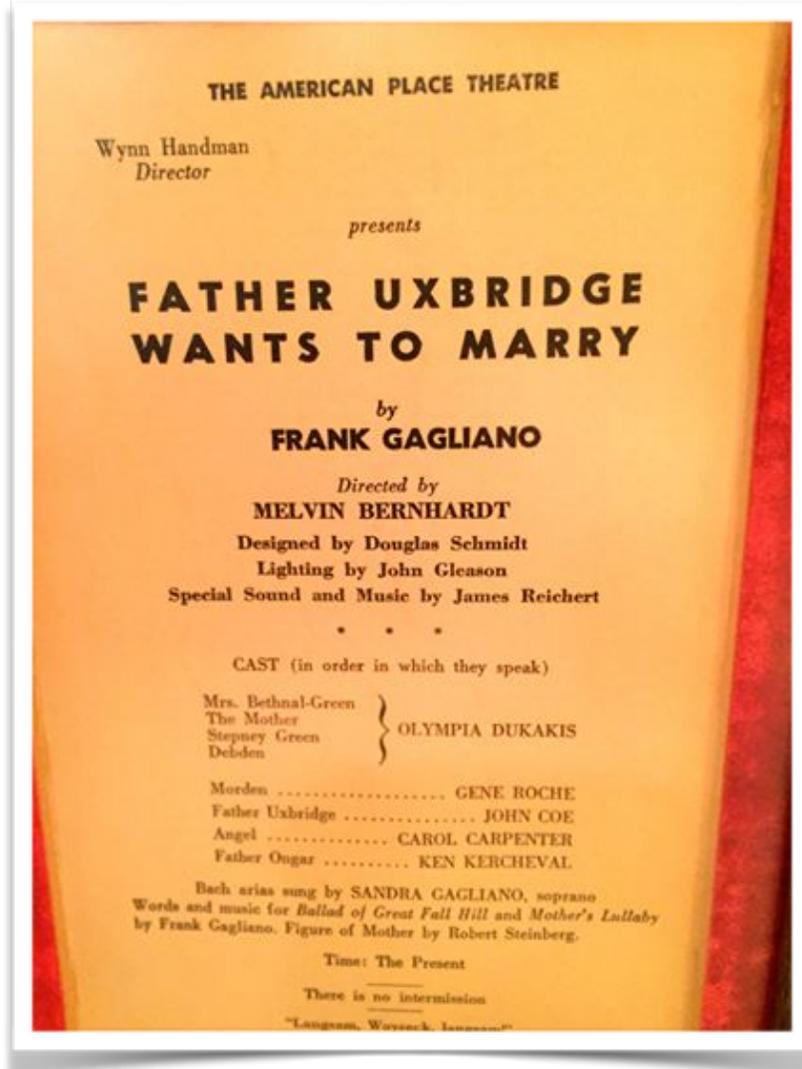
When I think of Wynn Handman’s recent death, I feel guilty for not staying in touch with him over the years. And I feel (in this plague year, when all theaters are closed) a great nostalgia for a time he represented — the 1960s — when American playwrights were burgeoning and had access to vital theaters of quality — like Wynn’s “American Place Theater (APT).”

Wynn Handman died on Saturday, 11 March. He was 97 years old. Pneumonia, complicated by the Covid-19 virus. He was a fierce activist for new American playwrights. And he was one of the top acting NY coaches of the day. In 1963 he—along with actor Michael Tolan and The Reverend Sidney Lanier (a relative of playwright Tennessee Williams), Vicar of St. Clement’s Episcopal Church on West 46th Street in Manhattan, formed the APT.

As noted in the NYTimes obit (link below), “Their mission was to promote new voices, approaches and subjects, an alternative to the often constricted commercial offerings nearby in the Broadway houses. . . .As a producer, Wynn brought the Greenwich Village theater revolution to spitting distance from Broadway, which, as far as he was concerned, was the enemy. . . — ‘I was drawn to challenging plays, and plays that would not succeed commercially and therefore needed a home. It was never in my mind to do a play that would become a hit. But that’s what most New York theaters are all about today,’ he said.”

Wynn produced early plays by Sam Shepherd, Marie Irene Fornes, Richard Nelson, others — and first plays by “Literary” writers like Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath.

And —he produced my play, “Father Uxbridge Wants To Marry.”



It all happened so fast. Three months earlier, “Father Uxbridge Wants To Marry” had its first reading at the O’Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. Critic John Lahr had seen the play there and, apparently, had recommended the play to Wynn. Then — wham! — by late September, we were in rehearsal with “Uxbridge” — starring Olympia Dukakis, Ken Kercheval, Eugene Roche, and John Coe, directed by Melvin Bernhardt. We opened at APT on 12 October 1967.

I don’t recall much interaction with Wynn at the time — though I recall his availability and positive and generous involvement when the rehearsals hit the inevitable snags.

And I do recall sitting in on some of the acting classes he invited me to. There, for the first time, I got an understanding about what the acting process was all about; came to understand how crucial it was for the playwright to initiate strong character “wants and obstacles” — in every scene, in every speech — on the page — so that the actor can more easily build a more active performance — in space.

Wynn was a master teacher: Not only did he work on the actor’s instrument (voice and body and mind), he also stressed the text: A stress I’d often find missing when I observed other noted acting classes of the period.

What were his strengths as a teacher and coach? Expertise, certainly; being direct; no nonsense, no coddling; tough love (but love, clearly — of the actor, and of the craft) — and formidable at text analysis. Nostalgia, of course, has its limits. But whatever the 1960s weren’t, they were a community of exciting, burgeoning, accessible, diverse, theatre artists. And Theater was affordable — to produce and/or to attend.

I’d like to believe that, however Theater emerges (and it WILL reemerge! — possibly poorer, hopefully less corporate!), — that it will still have the Wynn Handman ethos at work and will, once again, give American playwrights more access to more vital APT-like theaters of quality.

In 1996, back when I was Artistic Director of Carnegie Mellon’s Showcase Of New Plays, I felt that Wynn’s place as an icon of the American Theatre, and as a champion of the American playwright, was fast being forgotten,

and that his legacy had been shortchanged, I gave Wynn Handman a Lifetime Achievement Award. That's the last time I was in his presence. . . .R.I.P Wynn. FG

[Photos: 1) Early APT poster: Design of Playwright names. 2) Wynn: 3) Uxbridge ATP program]

[Two links follow: 1) Obit and 2) an earlier NYT story about Wynn, when he was still going strong at age 91. Followed by 3) a link to the Uxbridge revised text.]

1. (<https://www.nytimes.com/.../wynn-handman-dead-coronavirus.html>)
2. (<http://www.nytimes.com/.../former-students-and-wynn-place-sho....>)
3. (Revised UXBRIDGE text can be accessed in the My Works pages of the new www.gaglianoriff.net)

