

Derek Walcott “a True Literary Giant”

Poet and playwright taught at BU, founded Boston Playwrights’ Theatre | BY JOEL BROWN

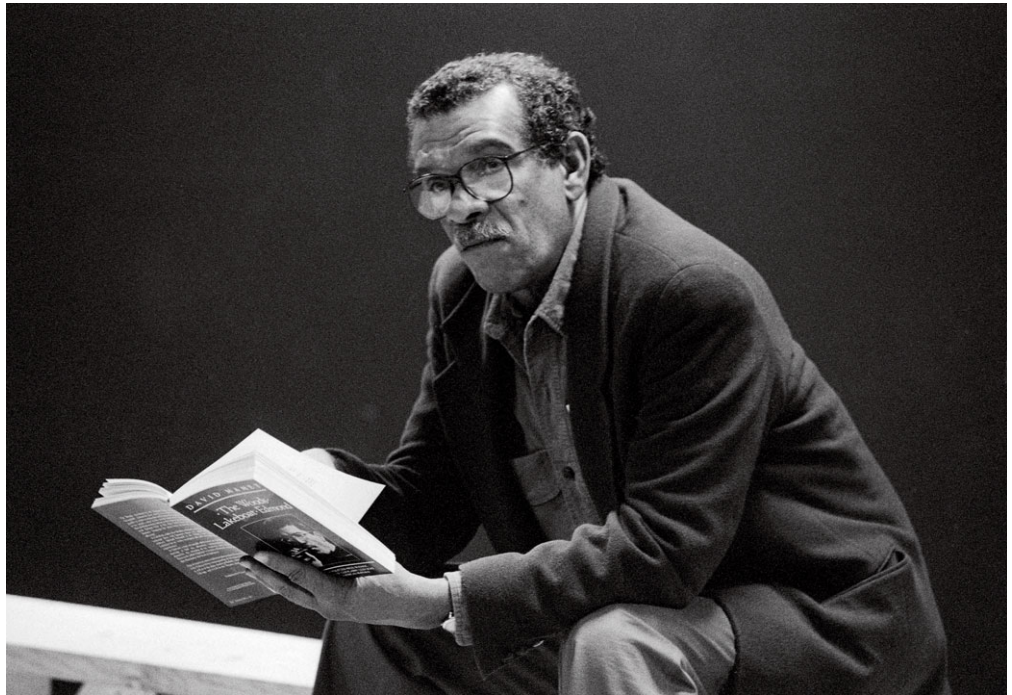
Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright Derek Walcott (Hon.’93), who taught at BU from 1981 until he retired in 2007, died March 17, 2017, at his home on his native Saint Lucia, at age 87.

“I am sad for BU and sad for the world,” says playwright Melinda Lopez (GRS’00), a College of Arts & Sciences adjunct assistant professor of playwriting, who was a student in Walcott’s playwriting class.

“For those of us who knew and loved him, Derek’s passing is a milestone in our lives—certainly it is in mine,” Boston Playwrights’ Theatre (BPT) artistic director Kate Snodgrass (GRS’90), a CAS professor of the practice of playwriting, wrote on the theater’s blog. Walcott founded the BPT in 1981. “For the world, we have lost a needed presence, a gifted poet and playwright, a true literary giant.”

Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 for work the Nobel committee called “a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment.” At the time, his most recent work was 1990’s *Omeros*, a Caribbean epic the committee said was “a work of incomparable ambitiousness, in which Walcott weaves his many strands into a whole.”

In the words of the Nobel committee in announcing



Derek Walcott was teaching poetry and playwriting at BU when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992.

the prize, “In him West Indian culture has found its great poet....Three loyalties are central for him—the Caribbean, where he lives, the English language, and his African origin.”

In Boston, Walcott was perhaps best known for his work in theater. In 1981, the year he began teaching in the Creative Writing Program as a CAS professor of English, he won a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, commonly

known as the “genius grant,” and he used a portion of his award to help found the BPT, still going strong today. His son, Peter, an architect, designed the first theater space in the rear at the Comm Ave facility, Snodgrass says. Walcott wanted playwrights and actors to have a place to grapple with new work, she says, and he loved working with actors.

“He wanted to bring poetry back to American theater; I don’t mean strict verse, but the rhythmic, musical language that Derek was so strong with,” she says. “He always wrote in verse, which is extraordinary and not done that often here. His work is Shakespearean

in its language and also in its themes.”

Snodgrass says that Walcott’s playwriting “is humanist and complicated,” with themes of colonialism and society-against-the-individual, but also seen through flawed yet heroic characters.

“There is a certain sadness around his plays, a wistful longing,” she says. That may be why she names play-with-music *The Joker of Seville*, written with his friend Galt McDermot, composer of *Hair*, as a favorite. “There’s a great deal of joy in that, and humor,” she says.

Lopez, author of *Sonia Flew* and *Becoming Cuba*, says Walcott was a “terrific and terrifying” teacher.

In his class, student playwrights brought in scenes to be read by actors. “Sometimes Derek would let the scene go for a page, and sometimes he’d stop it after the first line,” she says. “He’d ask all sorts of questions about the first line, the first moment, what happened before the lights went on.

“I remember a classmate of mine who literally could not get through the first line, because they spent 20 minutes of class time discussing what happened before that speech,” she says. “I watched my classmates just squirm and squirm, all of them wondering where this was going, and then there was the ‘aha moment,’ where we all got his point, which is that the play starts before anyone speaks. Derek didn’t explain—he *did*. And waited for us to catch up. And that could be terrifying if it was you. But he was right.”

Lopez recalls that in 2009 Walcott was visiting Boston and came to see a production of her play *From Orchids to Octopi* at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge. “He was lovely and gracious,” she says, “and then he said to me about the play, ‘That was a lot of words.’ That was so Derek, because it was absolutely spot-on, a very good critique that I would learn from, and it had his devilish humor.”

His approach to poetry class was similar. “Derek didn’t use class time for workshopping student poems,” says poet Kirun Kapur (GRS’00), who recently published the collection *Visiting Indira Gandhi’s Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015).

“If you wanted to talk about something you’d

written, you had to go and see him in his office, which felt a bit like visiting the lion in his den. You had to screw up your courage. He knew this and relished it, I think. The writing of poetry was a brutally serious undertaking to him—something requiring plenty of courage. I was lucky enough to have many extraordinary conversations with him in his office. We were both from islands, and he never got tired of talking about the sea.”

Born in 1930 on the island of Saint Lucia in the West Indies, Walcott published his first poems as a teenager. He taught school at various places around the Caribbean after graduating from the University College of the West Indies in Jamaica.

The first of his collections to catch the attention of critics was *In a Green Night*, published in 1962. Among his friends and supporters over the years were Robert Lowell (Hon.’77), Joseph Brodsky, and Seamus Heaney, the latter two also Nobel laureates. Walcott was also a talented painter, and his watercolors of Caribbean scenes sometimes appeared on his book covers.

His first play was produced in 1950, and he founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop (then called the Little Carib Theatre Workshop) in 1959. The troupe performed two of his plays at the Boston University Theatre in 1995, the Elliot Norton Award-winning *The Joker of Seville* and the Obie winner *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Walcott hit Broadway in 1998, with *The Capeman*, a collaboration with Paul Simon.

Game-Changing Foreign Correspondent and COM Dean

Bernard Redmont reported on world events, moved the college forward | BY TATIANA M. R. JOHNSON

As a broadcast journalist in Paris in 1968, Bernard S. Redmont was the first to report that North Vietnamese officials were willing to begin peace negotiations.

A foreign correspondent for 40 years, Redmont also covered Leon Trotsky’s assassination in Mexico, Juan Peron’s dictatorship in Argentina, and the Six-Day War in the Middle East, according to the *Washington Post*.

A former professor of journalism and dean emeritus of the College of Communication, Redmont died on January 23, 2017. He was 98.

He arrived at COM in early 1982, and was dean from 1983 to 1986. He led the college through curriculum reforms and a name change—from the School of Public Communication (SPC) to the College of Communication—a result of his 1983 long-range study of the school. He also helped pilot the continuing London Internship Programme in 1986.

In response to a 1985 call for proposals from the US government, Redmont proposed a project to train Afghan refugees as professional journalists in the wake of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The training ultimately was held in Peshawar, Pakistan, near the Afghan border, in a joint



Bernard Redmont, pictured here in Moscow, was a foreign correspondent for 40 years.

project between the United States Information Agency (USIA) and BU. Redmont had favored an alternate proposal—to train the journalists at COM, in an academic and independent framework—and his disagreements over the project with John Silber (Hon.’95), then the University president, led to his resignation.

Caryl Rivers, a COM professor of journalism, recalls Redmont as “a man who cared deeply for journalism, both in his career and in his time in academia.”

Redmont served in the US Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, coordinating broadcasts to Latin America. A World War II veteran and recipient