

A Parting Well Made

After sharing his passion for the magic of Shakespeare with generations of students, theatre professor David Richman exits the UNH teaching and performance stage

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PROFESSOR DAVID RICHMAN DIRECTING IN THE JOHNSON THEATRE (JEREMY GASOWSKI)

Ask David Richman how he felt about directing his final show after more than three decades as a theatre historian and professor at UNH, and he'll forego emotional reflection in favor of his signature straightforwardness

"I'm simply not very sentimental."

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Ask him to select a most memorable performance from the list of more than 40 that he's overseen at UNH and he'll deftly dodge that as well, stating plainly that his favorite show was always the one he was working on at the time.

Indeed, for those seeking sappy monologues on a life in the arts or saccharine musings about how much the last this or that means to Richman as he approaches his retirement this spring, you've come to the wrong place.

"I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you," Richman says.

But ask Richman about two things — Shakespeare and his students — and the hardy matter-of-fact veneer recedes, replaced with a vulnerable and emotional earnestness and a palpable, heartfelt appreciation.

For in those two things Richman has always found his truest driving forces. They are the purest passions that have fueled him as he weaved a memorable and award-winning career — a fulfilling journey that was sparked when he witnessed his first live Shakespeare production as a high school student in Philadelphia.

"Everything about Shakespeare bespeaks everything about theatre," Richman says. "There is no area of human endeavor that theatre does not touch, and Shakespeare's characters are more fully human than most of us are."

Richman has used that influence in the way he's always viewed his students — as humans first and pupils second. "He always treated us as colleagues and collaborators. There was very much a dynamic of teacher and student, but there was always a mutual respect there," says Carl Andress '92.

That mutual respect can be attributed to the fact that Richman — despite the inherent challenges that come with working on student productions — spent the last 33 years in what he viewed as his perfect environment.

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“That’s the nature of student theatre, every student show has built-in flaws. The students are still being trained. But I would not want to work in any other way,” Richman says. “The actors I want to work with are students. There’s no greater reward than when your students go on and accomplish things in the professional world.”

Perhaps Richman is able to embrace that imperfection because his journey to a life working in theatre was far from traditional. Aside from Shakespeare, there is another element that has defined his career and influenced every interaction he’s ever had with a student — Richman is blind.

It’s understandably not something he’s eager to address at this stage of his life, having answered exhaustive questions about its impact on his career for years, but it is undeniably a significant element in Richman’s story, a challenge he’s overcome in remarkable ways as a director, actor and writer in a medium that relies so heavily on visual impact.

For Richman, it was simply another way for his work to embody his love of Shakespeare, who in his estimation left everything one could possibly need to understand a character in the written words themselves. And Richman’s other senses were more than sharp enough for those lessons to be imparted in ways that have shaped careers for many of his students.

“He is very descriptive in what he wants. He approaches your character from such a text-based perspective — he knows so thoroughly what the character’s motivations are based on the text,” says Jamie Clavet ’07, a former student of Richman’s and

current colleague as the marketing and promotions specialist in the theatre and dance department. “It’s a really interesting way, but there’s no difference in the feeling of working with a seeing director vs. working with David. The thing that’s most important is the quality of instruction, and he just gives such great instruction.”

Lighting The Fire

Richman’s interest in theatre dates back so far he can’t even recall a time before he was taken by it. He does recall when his life’s course was formally altered for good when he took a field trip in high school to take in a touring production of “Romeo and Juliet.” It was the late 1960s, and Philadelphia had a lively theatre scene, including Broadway shows on their way to New York and an active theatre in the city itself, so Richman had experienced plays before. But nothing prepared him for his reaction that day.

“That production blew me away, not just as a piece of theatre and a piece of very passionate acting, but it was really my first exposure to the magic and passion and genuine life-changing excitement of Shakespeare,” Richman says. “I knew I wanted to devote my life to Shakespeare from that moment on.”

He also knew that likely meant he’d be doing so in the roles of professor and director. After earning a degree in English from Harvard and a doctorate from Stanford, Richman was hired by the University of Rochester, where he wound up being essentially a



DAVID RICHMAN REHEARSES HIS PLAY “LIVES OF TIRESIAS” IN 2019. HE WROTE THE PLAY, WHICH CHARTED “THE UNCANNY AND FAILED CAREER OF TIRESIAS, THE BLIND PROPHET OF THEBES,” RICHMAN NOTED AT THE TIME. (MORGAN SIMMONS ‘19/FILE PHOTO)

one-man theatre program. The school didn't have a theatre department, instead borrowing Richman from English to lead productions, as was often the case in colleges with such a structure.

After 11 years at Rochester, Richman landed a job at UNH in the fall of 1988. For the Pennsylvania native coming from New York state, "My only knowledge of New Hampshire was from Robert Frost."

Fitting, then, that it was a road not yet taken that initially made him uneasy about the transition. He'd led theatre productions at Rochester but hadn't taught courses on the subject.

"The only reservation I had was I didn't know if I had the professional qualifications to teach theatre. I didn't know if I was qualified to be a colleague of theatre professionals," Richman says. "Most of my apprehensions that first year were about that — would I be able to hold my own?"

The solution to calming those nerves wound up being fairly simple.

"Well, I directed a show, and it turned out pretty good," Richman quips. "Audiences liked it, and students started wanting to work with me."

A Well-Defined Character

Meghan Blakeman '11 has been involved in more than 50 Shakespeare productions as an actor, director, teacher or stage manager over the last dozen years or so. She has also built a career as a full-time teaching artist and



**RICHMAN GIVES FEEDBACK
DURING REHEARSAL. (JEREMY**

administrator at art schools (GASOWSKI) in New York City over that same span — and she credits Richman for significantly influencing all of it.

One of the most lasting lessons Richman taught Blakeman dates back to her early days at UNH and revolves around theatrically delivering a line she'd memorized many years prior to her arrival on campus.

In casting a show, Richman had the actors stand on stage and go down the line introducing themselves as a way of gauging their poise and self-assurance. So Blakeman stepped up and dutifully recited her line.

“Meghan Blakeman.”

“That was it, that was my line. He would sense whether or not we had confidence by how we introduced ourselves,” Blakeman says. “He taught us how to be confident through our voice, because his ears were really the way he saw the world. He kind of changed the way we saw ourselves through our vocal confidence.”

Changing the way students saw themselves, and saw the world of theatre, are what several former students described as Richman's greatest strengths. The picture each painted featured enough similarities that the resulting image was one of a well-defined character: stern and no-nonsense and often brutally honest with feedback, yet compassionate, supportive and always encouraging.

More than anything, Richman wanted to create an environment where his students had the autonomy to explore themselves as young adults and the roles they were in simultaneously.

“He was so kind but so firm, and those are the qualities I appreciated in him as a director,” Andress says.

Andress got into theatre with intentions of acting but quickly discovered he was better suited as a director. After moving to New York and bouncing through a series of unique jobs — including dressing up as children’s character Clifford the Big Red Dog, working at a fudge store and taking a position with an up-and-coming coffee chain called Starbucks — he carved out a niche that has led to a decades-long career directing and writing. The confidence to pursue that path was instilled by Richman.

“I started off as an actor but very quickly started to find my way as a director, and I think David’s enthusiasm, kindness and gentle leadership are the qualities I took with me,” Andress says. “David taught me to listen, and that’s the most important thing you can do as a director.”

Says Clavet: “David just made a really deep impact on me, and all of his students would probably say that. Especially those of us who have done Shakespeare post-graduation, because we probably pursued Shakespeare because of him.”

Someone You Could Listen To Forever

Richman was born two months prematurely, resulting in vision difficulties from birth — he noted in an interview with Connecticut newspaper the Republican American that had he been born five years earlier, he might not have survived, and had he been born five years later, medical and scientific advances may have allowed



“THE ACTORS I WANT TO WORK WITH ARE STUDENTS. THERE’S NO GREATER REWARD THAN WHEN YOUR STUDENTS GO ON AND ACCOMPLISH THINGS IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD,” SAYS DAVID RICHMAN, SEEN HERE TEACHING A CLASS IN 2018, THE

doctors to better combat his blindness.

YEAR HE RECEIVED A FACULTY EXCELLENCE AWARD FROM THE UNIVERSITY. (JEREMY GASOWSKI)

He can recall vaguely making out colors and shapes of objects in his early childhood years before losing his sight completely at age 12.

Enter Shakespeare. That first performance Richman attended as a teenager was so moving because the language in "Romeo and Juliet" so thoroughly illustrated the emotion and depth of the characters, Richman was able to fully experience the performance without the benefit of sight.

“There is no language to express and communicate the complex emotions Shakespeare’s characters are expressing and communicating equal to his language,” Richman says. “He has the most complex emotions depicted in a language that is as precise as it is eloquent. There are no other words than the words of Shakespeare’s characters to capture those emotions.”

Richman stayed true to his teenage inspiration by building a career as a Shakespeare historian, actor and director. Aside from the seemingly countless Shakespeare productions he’s directed, he has also played roles in many Shakespeare plays — including Prospero in a 2005 outdoor performance of "The Tempest" on Appledore Island in the Isles of Shoals — and has authored numerous pieces, both books and articles, related to the playwright’s works. He considers one of his career’s greatest joys the fact that he’s gone on to collaborate on Shakespeare productions — as an actor and as a director — with several of his former students who went on to professional careers in the theatre, several of whom founded production companies based on Shakespeare.

“I approach a play

Richman has worked extensively with material from other playwrights —

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including several pieces he’s written himself, including an adaptation of "The Odyssey" and a 2018 play he wrote and performed in about Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes — but it was Shakespeare that first inspired his appreciation for the richness of language that has made

him such a revered director. His complete and thorough understanding of every text he works with is the key to fully visualizing a performance without being able to watch each actor’s movements.

“I approach a play script the way Brahms approached a score,” Richman told the Chronicle of Higher Education in a 1998 interview. “You imagine your ideal of the play taking shape in your head.”

Richman hasn’t simply relied on his imagination for everything, though. Address recalls the way he often felt the texture of the fabric being used in costume design, asking for the colors to be described to him in vivid detail. Address also remembers Richman having models of his sets built for him, sized down to scale, so he could “feel every inch” of the performance space, and a tape recorder on-hand to compile voice notes.

Richman also utilizes a Braille script to follow along with the action in each show — he has shelves of said scripts crowded in his office — and employs students and colleagues to be sighted production assistants during rehearsals.

Still, there are times where it feels like Richman can see everything — sometimes with humorous results, as one critic infamously panned Richman’s portrayal of a blind character as not believable. Clavet remembers the time a student in one of Richman’s courses brought a guest to several lectures throughout

the semester, without announcing it. The guest never spoke, but Richman made sure to sarcastically ask if he'd enjoyed the course on the last day of classes.

"He always knew exactly what was going on," Andress echoes.

"You couldn't get anything past him."

Richman's impact on his students has left an imprint throughout the university over the last 30-plus years. He has received the Lindberg Award, given to the outstanding teacher-scholar in the College of Liberal Arts, as well as the Class of 1938 Professorship, which recognizes university-wide outstanding teaching. In 2018-19, Richman received the Jean C. Brierley Award, given annually to the outstanding teacher at UNH.

"He had such a great enthusiasm, and he was just so commanding," Andress says. "He was one of those people you could just listen to forever. David's style really did inspire me."

"Everything You Could Ever Want In A Teacher And A Friend"

What's inspiring Richman these days is the prospect of more time to spend in retirement with his wife, Susan, and his children and grandchildren. His son, Sam, is the chef and owner of a restaurant in Maine, and his daughter, Beatrice — "named among other things for a Shakespeare character," Richman muses — lives in Germany with her husband and both of



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(JEREMY GASOWSKI)

Richman's grandchildren.

The pandemic complicated the usual visits he and Susan would make to see Sam and Beatrice — the couple went more than a year without seeing Beatrice and her family because of COVID travel limitations — and with his 71st birthday just behind him this winter, it felt like the right time to step away from full-time teaching and directing. “I wanted to be able to spend time with the kids while I still can,” Richman says.

And despite his reticence to let sentimentality overflow, Richman does admit that the fond memories he formed at UNH will stay with him long after he leaves.

“One of the good things about teaching in this department is not only have I had a large number of magnificent colleagues — which I have — but I've also had generations of magnificent students, and I remember them all vividly,” Richman says. “I have vivid memories of every show I've ever worked on, and I remember vividly everyone who has ever been in a show that I've worked on.”

Those actors remember Richman just as vividly, which is perhaps the most fitting of tributes — that those memories are as rich, deep and meaningful as the texts Richman taught his students. Turns out there's a lot more connecting Richman and Shakespeare than a lifelong appreciation forged over more than five decades in the theatre.

“Shakespeare is everything that David is — spontaneous and silly and fun, but also intimidating at times. My relationship to Shakespeare is very much like my relationship with David — I was intimidated at first, but now it's so important to me,” Blakeman says. “David is everything you could ever want in a teacher and a friend. He really knows how to make people feel valued. As theater people, you're revealing yourself constantly, you're in this

constant state of vulnerability, and there was always this real safety with David.”

To honor Professor Richman, consider a gift to the Department of Theatre and Dance in his name.

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