



*“Originality means going back to origins; it does not mean trying to do something that no one has ever seen before.”*

# Charles Carshon

THEATRE FACULTY 1955 – 1990

*By the time Charles Carshon accepted a position at Sarah Lawrence in 1955, he was already an established drama teacher whose students included Warren Beatty, Suzanne Pleshette, Diana Sands, and Leslie Nielsen.*

Raised in Oklahoma, the child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Carshon was a teenager when he began acting in radio dramas—the perfect venue, says former student Barbara Kolsun '71, for his “deep, beautiful voice.” In 1942, after studying theatre at Northwestern University, he moved to New York and began teaching at the High School of the Performing Arts and the Neighborhood Playhouse. A few years later, he met his wife, Gloria Barret, who had also attended Northwestern. Carshon went on to teach at the Stella Adler Studio and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts as well as his own private studio before accepting a position at Sarah Lawrence, where he remained for 35 years. Gloria joined him in the theatre program 15 years later, and after a long, collaborative career the two retired from Sarah Lawrence in 1990. Carshon passed away after a long illness on October 28, 2011, at the age of 91.

Throughout his teaching career, Carshon never stopped acting, which he felt was critical to understanding the challenges his students faced. Together, the Carshons founded the off-Broadway Tapestry Theatre, which they later re-formed as the Green Gate Theatre; many of their students worked and performed there.

He loved traditional theatre. “Originality,” he said in a 1973 interview, “means going back to origins; it does not mean trying to do something that is different, that no one has ever seen before. I don’t think it’s necessary to improve or update Shakespeare or Moliere ... [but to] reanimate them, rediscover them for each new generation.” Carshon believed acting required great courage and introspection. For an aspiring actor, he said, the most important classes were “all his classes outside the theatre,” where he would learn “literary, historical, psychological, philosophical, scientific references—all those things which [would] nourish him and keep him a human being.

“If you spend all your life eating, sleeping, talking theatre,” he said, “when you get on the stage, all you can play is an actor.”

Kolsun describes Carshon as “very academic” and his classes as “complex and thorough,” grounded in theatre history and literature. His coaching was dynamic; a former student described Carshon as “a marvelous, larger-than-life person” who had great empathy for his students.

Although Carshon dedicated his life to the theatre, according to Gloria, “Poetry was his great love.” He wrote formalist poetry and toured the Midwest, giving “poetry concerts.” At the YMHA, the couple staged recitations of poems by classic poets such as Yeats and Pound. Carshon also wrote a series of autobiographical short stories, which were published in 2011 as *When Jimmy Was Darling*.

Carshon’s dedication to his students fostered lifelong connections. Says Kolsun: “He was my friend for 44 years. He was my surrogate father, my mentor, my friend, my teacher, and my don. ... He was incredibly generous of spirit.” John Benitz '87, a theatre professor at Chapman University, wrote in an e-mail: “It seems Charles’ life work was to gently, generously care for the development of theatre artists. Charles was always there to support and encourage me, provide guidance, battle with me (we had great debates!), and help me laugh when I made mistakes—he had that huge laugh that burst out. I can never separate what Charles taught me from who I am today. He is and will always be a huge part of my life.”

Charles Carshon strived to heighten people’s awareness; he once said that good theatre made people wake up and “develop thought and the capacity to feel.” Those who had the good fortune to receive his teachings and enjoy his performances did just that. 🎭

—Gillian Gilman Cuff '88

ABOVE: GLORIA AND CHARLES CARSHON; PHOTO BY GARY GLADSTONE, DATE UNKNOWN. COURTESY OF THE SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE ARCHIVES.