

A Moment with Brenda Bynum

Druid Hills resident, Brenda Bynum, received the 2015 Governor's Award for the Arts & Humanities and has been called the "First Lady of Atlanta Theatre." Brenda has been involved in more than 60 Atlanta productions as an actor and/or director, and she taught theatre at Emory University for 17 years. After her retirement in 2000, her colleagues at Emory established "The Brenda Bynum Award" which is bestowed upon an outstanding theater student each year.

Can you tell us a bit about your career and your relationship with Emory University?

I was brought to Theatre Emory in its first season by James Flannery, who established the Department of Theatre Studies and Theatre Emory in 1982, to do the title role in Euripides' "Hecuba" in the spring of 1983. As a result of that experience I started teaching acting there the following fall and was privileged to be a part of the growth of the program for the next 17 years.

In the beginning, there was only an office and a shared performance space in the DUC and our classes were nomadic. We would teach in any space no one else wanted to use – once my Intro to Acting class was in the visiting men's locker room in the new gym and at another time my home was much closer to my classroom in the Burlington Rd. Building than was my office on the Quad. Our first real home was the fabled Annex B – a barracks-type building which was eventually demolished to make way for the Goizueta Business School. It was barely habitable by normal standards, but I have nothing but fond memories of the extraordinary work which happened there. The surroundings fostered a renegade zest in

our theatrical hearts and it was always available for new projects because no one else wanted it. I loved all of my years at Emory, but the ones in Annex B were the best!

Concurrent with my years at Emory, I was teaching acting in the Professional Intern Program at the Alliance Theater. This was a 2-year post-graduate program which drew top theater students from universities all over the country. Some of them went on to successful careers in New York, Los Angeles and in between but many of them stayed in Atlanta and are the backbone of our theater community. I am not going to name names because I don't want to leave anyone out, but next time you see an extraordinary performance on an Atlanta stage the chances are very good that you are looking at

one of our former interns. I have had the very happy experience of working professionally with a number of them myself.

As someone who has taught Atlanta's top actors and actresses, what advice would you give to young (or old!) aspiring actors?

Other than "be on time, learn your lines, listen and project", the best advice I would still offer to aspiring actors is to generate your own work. Don't just sit around and wait for someone to



Family picture taken at the State Capitol on the day Brenda received the Governor's Award.

offer you a part in their play because that will not feed your passion indefinitely. Make work for yourself and make work for others.

The work I have loved most in my career is probably the more than a dozen plays based on the lives of real women that I have developed and performed in over the years. I have been touring "Jordan Is So Chilly", based on the life of Georgia author Lillian Smith, for the last 3 years all over the Southeast. She was an extraordinary artist and activist for social justice and I do it because I believe whole-heartedly that every Georgian should know about her. My newest project is based on the life of another remarkable woman, Helen Matthews Lewis. If these names are not familiar to you, then you know why I am doing it. Maybe I can change that.

I understand you brought Samuel Beckett's entire dramatic canon to Atlanta. What is it about Beckett's work that particularly appeals to you?

My second great love in theater is Samuel Beckett. I set a goal in the 1990s to bring his entire canon of dramatic work to Atlanta's professional stages and Emory was a big help in making that happen. The last evening of short Beckett plays, all that were left, was mounted in the Mary Gray Munroe Theater there at the end of the 20th century. I have also spent a lot of time over the past 15 years working with

the editors of his correspondence as a volunteer proofreader and cheerleader. The editorial offices are here at Emory as well, under the direction of Lois Overbeck, and Volume 4 is due out in the fall. The first three volumes were released worldwide to unanimous critical acclaim over the past 8 years and I consider this to be one of the chief literary events of our time. Beckett has been wisely described as the playwright of hope, rather than optimism, and, though many disagree, I find his work profoundly life-affirming. He stands alone.

If there was one Beckett play that you'd recommend to see/read, which would it be and why?

My favorite Beckett play is "Come and Go" a very short piece about three women who sit on a bench and share memories. I have directed it a dozen times and could do it again and again and never get to the bottom of it.

What projects are you currently working on?

So, now I am long retired from both academe and showbiz – officially – but my life still revolves around projects in both areas when my husband, Cary and I are not traveling or reading or talking or spending time with our children and grandchildren.

In addition to the theatrical pieces I am still working on, I am active in the Emory Emeritus College which affords a rich schedule of lectures and discussion groups as well as volunteer opportunities like days at MedShare sorting donated medical supplies to be shipped to third-world clinics without cost. The

Emeritus College also provides the most wonderful opportunity to meet and engage with colleagues from all across the academic spectrum – not just those in my field.

And I say very proudly that I am Asst. Manager of the Druid Hills Voting Precinct and work 16-hour days at every election. We have six elections and runoffs coming up in 2016 (in case you haven't heard) and, if I am getting up at 4:45 to get the polls opened on time, nobody reading this has any

excuse at all to not get to the polls and vote!!!

Truly, the best advice I used to give my students was that real life was way more important than showbiz, but the best of all worlds was being able to have both. I have been very, very lucky to live where I do and be able to make that happen and I have been thrilled to see how many of those students are doing the same – making homes, making babies and making art!



Production shot taken during a performance of the Lillian Smith play.