In Memory

Brooks McNamara
1937–2009

Brooks McNamara, who passed away on 8 May 2009, was my longtime colleague. Our lives have followed closely parallel paths. Both of us served in the US Army, both earned MA degrees from the University of Iowa, both have PhDs from Tulane University. Brooks arrived at Tulane just as I was starting to teach there and edit TDR. He worked on TDR as a student assistant until he finished his dissertation in 1965 and took a job at the University of Delaware. In 1968, Brooks joined the Drama Department at NYU (reinvented in 1980 as Performance Studies). In 1969, Brooks designed the “Makbeth Maze,” a walk-through prelude to my/The Performance Group’s production of The Scottish Play.

Our contact with each other might have been casual once Brooks left Tulane were it not for the fact that in the academic year 1966/67 the Tulane Theatre Department exploded. Department chair Monroe Lippman resigned because he felt that the Tulane administration had double-crossed the department he had spent so many years developing. Core faculty members, including me, quit in sympathy. Enter Robert W. Corrigan, the Johnny Appleseed of American academic theatre, and the man who in 1958 had brought TDR from Carlton College to Tulane. (When Corrigan moved to Carnegie Mellon—then Carnegie Tech—in 1962, I took his Tulane job and TDR.) But Corrigan never stayed long anywhere. By 1966, he was at NYU running the new School of the Arts (not yet Tisch). Corrigan got wind of Tulane’s undoing. He asked me to come to NYU in the fall of 1967, to bring TDR with me, and to head the Department of Drama and Cinema. Wisely, I knew my limitations. I told Corrigan to recruit Lippman as chair.

Lippman in turn brought Brooks. The five of us—known as “the Tulane Mafia”: Corrigan, Lippman, McNamara, J. Michael Miller (another Tulane PhD), and me—were joined by Ted Hoffman, Corrigan’s colleague from Carnegie (and TDR’s Associate Editor). Miller and Hoffman recruited top professionals to do theatre training; producer Robert Saudek and longtime NYU teacher Haig Manoogian ran the film program. In terms of academics, at that point in time it all operated under the rubric of the Department of Drama and Cinema. Lippman, McNamara, and I took charge of theatre scholarship; cinema soon became its own department. Then graduate drama was separated from undergraduate drama. During the 1970s, performance studies emerged from drama, confirmed with the name change in 1980. Brooks was a very important player in the transformation from drama to performance studies.

What Brooks brought to the table in addition to his splendid scholarly abilities, was his Midwestern approach to life. Born in Peoria, Illinois, earning his BA from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and his MA from Iowa, Brooks radiated common sense nicely peppered with
irony. He focused his scholarly attention on popular entertainments. I really don’t know what first drew him to these heretofore neglected acts and arts. Brooks was fascinated by medicine shows, mountebanks, jugglers, magicians, and all sorts of street performers. He loved burlesque, vaudeville, and the pizzazz of show business. Brooks wasn’t taken in—but he knew that these entertainers were not getting the respect they deserved. Brooks set out to change that. He was still at it in 2001 when he wrote in *TDR*:

The theatre in any time is not exclusively made up of high art, but of a complex of related forms: popular and amateur entertainment, and, in the 20th century, to a great extent, radio, television, motion pictures, and the internet. Until recently, most of these have been ignored by historians of theatre and drama, though they are important influences on the theatre and are influenced by it. [...] In any case, it is a safe bet that most still are being ignored by the majority of scholars. (45, 4 [T172]:125)

Brooks was interested in popular entertainments in their own right. But he also knew that the so-called high arts could not exist without drawing nourishment from their roots sunk deep in the dirts of everyday life.


Throughout his long career, Brooks brought to all of his work a painstaking attention. He did not suffer messy thinking or writing, and certainly not messy archiving.

In 1976, the Shubert Organization invited Brooks to examine the vast conglomeration of papers, photographs, programs, and what-have-you piled in the many Shubert theatres in New York and around the country. Looking at the stuff, Brooks knew he had the makings of a major collection—one that would document and narrate much of 20th-century American Broadway theatre and its outreaches nationwide via touring and satellite theatres. After all, the Shubert chain was dominant for many decades. Brooks worked with archivist Brigitte Kueppers to train and employ dozens of NYU Performance Studies students to organize the trove of items—more than six million in total. It took 10 years to get the collection in shape for public use (www.shubertarchive.org/index_flash.htm). Brooks was director of the archive from its inception until 1999.

In creating the Shubert Archive, Brooks and his colleagues reintroduced Broadway to academia. Up until World War II, Broadway was home both to popular entertainments and elite artistic endeavors such as the plays of Eugene O’Neill and the productions of the Group Theatre. But after the War, Broadway steadily declined as a serious venue. By the time I was in graduate school, Broadway was disparaged as crass, derivative, and unimportant artistically. In transforming a vast hodge-podge of documents into the Shubert Archive, Brooks recuperated Broadway as both a serious artistic site and the epicenter of a certain genre of popular entertainment.

Even as he was guiding the Shubert Archive, Brooks was the go-to guy for dissertations at Performance Studies/NYU. He remained fulltime on the faculty until he retired to emeritus status in 1996—and even then he directed some dissertations. I don’t know the exact number
of dissertations Brooks directed over his more than three decades of advising—but it is a big number. From 1987 to 2000, according to Dissertation Abstracts and ProQuest, Brooks directed 39 dissertations. Extrapolating from that pace, I estimate that Brooks directed more than 80 dissertations. Who knows how many dissertation committees he sat on? His labors as a dissertation director are surely worth an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.


During his last years of life, Brooks suffered from sporadic cerebellar ataxia, a degenerative nerve disorder. He walked and spoke with difficulty. He spent the preponderance of his time in his Doylestown, Pennsylvania, home. His ebullience was suppressed. I do not know how he felt inside, whether or not he still was entertained by all the entertainments he brought to the attention of his students and the rest of us. I saw him infrequently—mostly as he and his devoted wife Nan passed by in the street near to our Manhattan homes close to the NYU campus. But I remember Brooks not as a person afflicted, but as a man flush with wit, wisdom, and enthusiasm, an ironic smile articulating his bearded face, his eyes brightly probing through the lenses of his spectacles.

May he rest well, his works flourishing after him.

—Richard Schechner