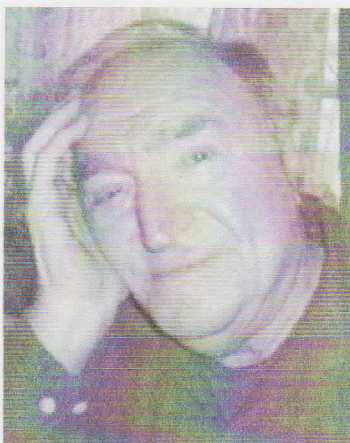




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Give Wynn a Hand

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By Gerard Raymond

As he approaches his 85th birthday, beloved acting teacher and director Wynn Handman is busy working on his Literature to Life program, one of his projects with the American Place Theatre, the institution he co-founded in 1962. And four times a week he continues teaching actors, which he has done for 55 years.

Handman's lifelong commitment to theatre will be celebrated on Mon., May 21, at the Hudson Theatre with a gala dinner-dance and a performance of *Wynn, Place & Show*, commemorating his birthday and the 45th anniversary of the American Place Theatre's founding. Many well-known actors either trained by Handman or who got their start at the American Place will salute him, including Alec Baldwin, Eric Bogosian, Phyllis Newman, Marian Seldes, and Sam Shepard.

When discussing his career, Handman speaks with a passion undiminished by more than 50 years of work. "I can say without hesitation that without Sanford Meisner, there would be no Wynn Handman's career in the theatre," he says, acknowledging his mentor and major influence. It was after World War II that the young Handman took advantage of the G.I. Bill to study acting with Meisner, and by 1955, Handman was teaching his own classes. "I found it's something I could do, and do it well," he explains. "Acting is so much about suggestion. I had an intuitive understanding of what Sandy was getting at. It seemed right for me, and has been that way ever since." But he declines to talk about his method: "Let me just say it's organic. It means coming from life."

In the early '60s, Handman felt he had to do more than just teach: "I thought what was most needed was a place where you could do high-quality writing — work by talented writers which it would be a waste if their work were not done on stage and yet the commercial theatre was not the place for them." With Sidney Lanier and Michael Tolan, Handman founded the American Place Theatre, originally in residence at St. Clement's Church in the heart of New York's theatre district. In the following decades, Handman was recognized as the artistic force behind the institution, which won an Obie Award in 1982 for "uncompromising commitment to conventional and daring plays." Says Handman, "I'm very proud of that citation. That phrase sums it up for me."

Handman was also one of the earliest practitioners to present the work of women and writers of color. "It was very diverse but it wasn't consciously diverse," he says of the American Place's programming. "I was open to high-quality writing. It was simply putting voices worth hearing on the stage." Today, Literature to Life is "like another act in my career…with the focus on bringing good literature to life for students." Describing the performance-based literary touring program, he says, "They're not readings…. The actors have worked on the material for a period of months, and every moment is alive and fully realized in terms of the characters, and it's played in the present tense. If you sit with those students when those shows go on, you realize the impact you're having on them, how you're awakening their imagination. For many of them, it's the first time they're seeing live theatre."

And Handman has no plans to slow down. "I've had two lives in my career that go simultaneously," he says. "I find the teaching just as rewarding, just as enlivening, and just as much joy as ever. I wouldn't want to give it up. And the directing is equally important. I have it all the way I want it. So why should I stop?"