

George Woodyard and “Kansas International”¹

Stuart A. Day

After forty years as a professor at the University of Kansas, George Woodyard finally had the opportunity to get an office with windows. But what should he do with the 2,824 books of theater that adorned the walls of his office (a collection that doesn't include his home library, which is also replete with masks from all over the world)? Solution: he had to take an office without windows, but with enough space for his books. In another office he had what we now call the Woodyard Archives—the texts of more than one thousand plays (originating on old and new computers, as well as typewriters) from innumerable Latin American playwrights who, throughout the years, had sent Professor Woodyard their artistic creations. His ever-shrinking workspace was also crammed with a collection of journals with 165 different titles, among them the *Latin American Theatre Review*, which he founded in 1967 as part of a supposedly occasional series for the university. But there is evidence that Woodyard (and Fred Litto, his co-editor in the early years of the journal) had long-term intentions because they put “1/1” on the first cover as an act of faith in the future. It was, without a doubt, the idealism of these young professors that gave them the pioneering hope that the journal could last—if they were really lucky—four or five years. It was the innocence of youth that didn't allow them to foresee that the journal would surpass the four-decade mark.

While Woodyard spent much of his time with his books and without natural light, his office was always inviting—it is there that he received thousands of students. It was there that students near the end of their undergraduate careers had conversed with him about the plays they were presenting for the classes that he had taught, and where he discussed the dissertations of many a doctoral student. These students, and many more *teatristas*, were members of his extended family—if he was not one of the fathers of Latin

American theatre studies in the United States, Woodyard was perhaps the grandfather or the great-grandfather. He was born in 1934 on a farm in the state of Illinois, the last of nine siblings, and upon turning fifteen he began his university studies at Eastern Illinois University, near his home. Although attending college was not an inherited custom, Woodyard changed this aspect of family history. His children and grandchildren have a collection of diplomas and have lived in Germany, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, and Japan. They are now spread out across the country but often return to the Woodyard home, which was also the stage for many important events. If the hotels of Lawrence were the site of the original congresses of "Latin American Theatre Today," organized by Woodyard with the help of many, his home was where people would celebrate Latin American cultures and where strong friendships were established. It was also where the police arrived to see why this distinguished professor, a member of Rotary International and backbone of the social and intellectual scaffolding of the community, had a band in his garden that was waking the entire neighborhood at one in the morning with an unknown rhythm.

While the only light in his workspace was artificial, Woodyard's years in Kansas were anything but opaque. During his time as Dean of International Studies (1984-1989) and as the Director of International Programs (1989-1996) he had a strong panoramic vision of the university campus. More precisely, it was a vision that the state of Kansas, so centrally isolated, could be interconnected with a world that went far beyond the Midwestern United States. His impact in this area extends the progressive (if distant) spirit of Kansas, an aspect that is so important to the history of the state. In an autobiographical piece for a special number of *Theatre Journal* headed by Jean Graham-Jones, Woodyard writes about the time that he spent in Las Cruces as he worked on his MA: "Barely nineteen years old, I had, astonishingly, never met a native speaker of Spanish or seen a professional theatre performance. The year in New Mexico changed all of that. My very first night there, in neighboring El Paso, I saw the traveling company performance of *John Brown's Body*, little suspecting that I would spend the greater part of my life in northeastern Kansas, where John Brown launched his abolitionist crusade" (574). One of the projects that George Woodyard established, with the goal of offering professors, students, and members of the community the opportunity to continue down the progressive path of their state, was the Hall Center for the Humanities, where the ideas of education and mutual understanding are at the fore. Along with the governor of Kansas, Woodyard also founded the

Kansas International, the organization that sums up, in its name, the official, academic, and personal activities of this man as a multifaceted intellectual.

In 1996, Woodyard returned to the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, although he had never stopped teaching. There he would once again occupy an old, dark, gloomy office (actually it was pretty nice—but no natural light!). Perhaps it was the light of the theatrical stage that gave him his power and energy to go, as he did just a few weeks before his death, to a different artistic program every night during seven or eight nights in a row. Those who have accompanied him on trips to Latin America know that, for him, seeing one play a day was not enough. If people hoped to follow him, they would have to be willing to ignore not only traffic laws, but also natural laws—for example, the one that says young people have more energy than old people. Although he never lacked dramatic energy, when he retired in 2005, many lamented that he had finished his career and that they could no longer follow him down the streets of Mexico City or Buenos Aires.

In order to decipher the eighteen pages of his *Curriculum Vitae*, written with black letters on a white paper, one needs a magnifying glass. Yet not even a magnifying glass can reveal the colors of his career: the one hundred twenty-two publications; the numerous awards, grants and scholarships (several National Endowment for the Humanities, a Fulbright, and many others); and the multitude of doctoral students that he directed (the first graduated in 1974 and the last in 2005). In the field of theatrical criticism, more than in others, an academic article (for example) is the result of a process that requires meeting the playwright, seeing a performance, having a late dinner with the cast, and taking a taxi with a group of friends to lose one's self in the world of the theatre. These activities give meaning to his CV, turning it into a true document of life. In a similar manner, the interpersonal and professional details provide meaning to the awards that he received, such as—among others—the Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Hispanic Theatre Festival of Miami, the Diploma al Mérito Teatral of the Asociación Mexicana de Investigación Teatral, the Cramer Award for Teaching and Research, el Premio Armando Discépolo, and the Ollantay Award.

While it is said that in the 1970s Professor Woodyard spent two months traveling through Central America and the Southern Cone—leaving Eleanor and his four children behind—in order to learn more deeply about these regions, no one doubts his dedication as a husband and father (and later, grandfather), with insuperable generosity and kindness. As a professor, he resisted the abuses of power that are sometimes caricatured when recount-

ing anecdotes from his generation. Upon deciding what type of professor he wished to be, perhaps he remembered a letter he received in the 1960s during the first years of the *LATR*. Basing himself on the comments of his editorial staff, which had undoubtedly given him good advice, Woodyard—George—refused to publish the article of a distinguished professor. In answer to the negative, the distinguished professor replied, with a tone that a typewriter communicates much better than a computer: “Dear *Assistant Professor* Woodyard....”

University of Kansas

Note

- ¹ Many thanks to David Dalton for translating this short piece from Spanish to English.

Works Cited

Woodyard, George. “The Theatre Journal Auto/Archive.” *Theatre Journal* 56.3 (October 2004): 547-51.