



My Teacher Tony

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My teacher Tony Montanaro passed away on December 13, 2002 in his home in Casco, Maine, surrounded by his loving family. He was a master mime and a friend to the storytelling community, and I am honored to have this opportunity to write about him.

Tony was born in New Jersey in 1927, and earned a drama degree from Columbia University. In 1956 he saw Marcel Marceau's historic first performance in the U.S., and flew to Paris to study with Marceau and his teacher Etienne Decroux. After a consummate performing career all over Europe and the U.S., he founded Celebration Barn Theater in South Paris, Maine, in 1972 and devoted 30 years of his life to performing, directing, and teaching the art of self-expression.

I have studied with Tony almost every summer since 1992. The Celebration Barn was my idea of Heaven. We had classes all day and in the evening, too. His workshops consisted of physical exercises, (lots of rolling on the floor), mime and storytelling techniques, improvisation with movement, voice, and text, and critique sessions. I would write new materials and work on old ones. The intensely creative few weeks in summer would sustain me all year.

As a teacher and director, Tony was simply a miracle. He did not just teach mimes and storytellers. Actors, dancers, musicians, magicians, jugglers, and clowns flocked to his workshops. He had students from all over the U.S., Canada, Germany, Japan, Egypt, and India. I can easily name dozens of professional performers whose talent Tony cultivated and nurtured. In his classes I even met public speakers, social workers, and medical professionals. His love for teaching his art was so strong it was magnetic. And he was funny! I mean, sidesplitting funny! We were often in tears. No one left his class without being totally energized and deeply enlightened.



We often had hours of critique sessions in the evening, when each student took turns to go up and do something. The variety of what happened on that stage was staggering. You could just show Tony a beginning of an idea, a “half-baked” piece, and he would immediately come up with twenty different ideas to make it better. Not only did he understand accurately what each student was trying to accomplish, but also he saw us beyond it in our wildest possibilities. As his wife and protégé Karen Montanaro put it, “he saw us better than we saw ourselves.”

Although I always benefited immensely from his wonderful exercises and critiques, it took me many years to begin to grasp the essence of his teaching, what he was really trying to convey. What he ultimately taught me was to be truly fearless and free on stage; that the Spirit (or Awareness or God or whatever you want to call it) is always with you and constantly making you better. In the last few years I had finally begun to understand this, and our time together became even more productive. Even after he discovered he had cancer, he continued teaching right into the fall of 2002. Every moment he spent with me was magical and golden.

Tony was a brilliant performer, an amazing teacher, and a fine gem of a human being. I feel like a ten-year-old who lost her father. Yet I know I am one of the lucky ones to have known a true teacher. So are many storytellers who had a chance to study with him. His presence still graces many of us, both onstage and off.