

## George Robert Allen, III (17 Jul 1927 - 20 Oct 2003)

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**Allen, George Robert III.** George Robert Allen III was born July 17, 1927 in Worthington, Indiana. He attended Indiana University, graduating from Indiana State University. He began his teaching career in Hoopeston, Illinois. He left to go to New York City where he was a director for Theatre Guild and taught at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and attended Columbia University. Returning to Indiana, he taught at Indiana State University. He moved to Washington, DC, where he taught one year at Springbrook HS in Maryland and then the remainder of his career at Falls Church HS, Fairfax, Virginia. Retiring in June, 1985 he moved to Mount Dora, Florida, passing away there October 20, 2003. Having lived on and loved Capitol Hill many years, it was his wish to return and he has.

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### **Students of Falls Church Drama Teacher Work to Extend Lessons to a New Class**

*By Darien Bates*

Even after 38 years, Melinda Pittman can still remember her first day of class at Falls Church High School. It was the first high school classroom she had ever walked into, an intimidated ninth grader trying to understand who she was. She can recall the fear, the anxiety, and she can just as easily remember those fears vanishing with the sound of a single laugh, the unfettered, raucous sound of Mr. George Robert Allen, or Grallen, as his students would call him for the 22 years he taught at the school.

Last week at the Falls Church High School awards night, former students of Mr. Allen presented the first annual Grallen Award to two theater students. The award, created after the passing of their former teacher last year, is to acknowledge the efforts of students every year, as well as honor the legacy of the man who helped establish the Falls Church High School theater department.

Earlier in the day, a dozen of Allen's former students met at The Sign of the Whale, a restaurant in Falls Church, to share memories about Allen and to prepare for the presentation of the award. Their ages ranging from 40s to 50s, Allen's former proteges passed stories across the table and across generations.

Despite being in the class of 1979, Wes Johnson, today a professional actor and comedian, conversed easily with alumni like Kathy Mann Horlick, who attended the school nearly a decade before. Their stories of Allen are remarkably similar, from his singular appearance to the excerpt from "Harvey" that he would recite before every play. A teacher of theater at Falls Church High School from 1966 until 1988, Allen came to the school with extensive experience in the world of theater.

He worked for some time in New York directing Off-Broadway theater, and working with some of the industry's most impressive names including Eartha Kitt and Betty Bacall, known better as Lauren Bacall. But he decided to leave professional theater, telling his students that he was tired of how jaded many people in the business were, and the negative attitudes they brought to the theater.

Working with high school students allowed Allen to reconnect with the joy of discovery and adventure he felt lacking among adult professionals. For his students, his presence was an incredible opportunity. "We got a pro who wanted to be there," Pittman said. But it wasn't just his experience that made Allen a great teacher. He had a charisma and style which immediately endeared him to his students.

Descriptions have compared him to Danny Kaye or Tommy Tune, with his blond hair and 6'6" lanky frame which he carried with a surprising amount of grace, due in part to ballet lessons early in his life.

Throughout his tenure at the high school he always dressed primly in a three piece suit, which never seemed out of place to his students. And of course there was that laugh. His students all remember it

the same; loud, joyous and unashamed, it welcomed students in and made them feel willing to be themselves.

Johnson recalled one time when Allen dressed in a bunny suit for a pep rally, cutting a ridiculous figure in the enormous costume. And yet because it was Mr. Allen, no one minded. "He could puncture pretension very easily," Johnson said. But behind all the frivolity and play was an intense mind that expected the best from his students.

During some of the years he taught, the theater department put on as many as eight performances, some directed by Allen, others were student productions he supervised. Pittman, who now runs a theater company in Oregon, said that even after going to college and graduate school for theater, her high school experience remains one of the best and most intense theater experiences. She said that it was important to Allen that one never waste time on stage.

She talked about one time when a student was doing a scene that involved a long speech he had memorized. Allen noticed he wasn't paying any attention to his scene partner so Allen got up on stage and took the place of the partner, without the speaker noticing.

As the speech continued Allen began un-tucking his shirt tails, all the while, trying not to laugh. It wasn't until the end of the speech that the kid noticed. The lesson, as Pittman can still remember, is that acting isn't about saying lines; it's about reacting to and interacting with the other people around you. Allen also helped his students learn all the technical aspects of theater.

Things like set painting and lighting were just as important as the actors who walked the stage, and many of his students would do everything. But the most common piece of advice that all his students still remember is one word: "project." Johnson said that during rehearsal Allen would sit at the back of the theater and watch the proceedings.

Whenever he couldn't hear one of the actors he would call out for him or her to project. Johnson learned that there was no point to theater if the audience couldn't hear what was being said. The high standards that Allen held his students to in theater, was also translated to their other classes. If they weren't able to keep their grades at a high enough level, they wouldn't be allowed to be in plays, no exceptions, no matter how talented they were. And there were many times when talent wasn't the most important thing.

Pittman said that while there was a core group of theater students who were involved in every play, Allen often liked to cast outside the theater department, choosing someone who never expected to go up on stage only to find freedom in a role. Not a small number of the alumni who still talk lovingly about their old teacher were introduced to theater for the first time by G. R. Allen. Some, like Pittman have pursued theater since leaving high school, while for others, the last day of high school also signified their last time on stage. But in either case the impact of what he taught has lasted. Craig Geoffrion, class of '72, went 30 years before recently getting back into theater.

He now performs with the Falls Church-based providence players, and recently was honored by a Washington Area community theater organization for his performance in "The Man Who Came to Dinner."

Learning to act, he said, has given him confidence both on and off the stage. Michael Davitt, class of 1973, said that while he has never gotten back on the stage, but he has been able to use what he learned about public speaking and especially projecting, in his work at the Defense Department. But while many of his students look back with deep fondness about their time under Allen, there were also times, especially early on, when tension about Allen's dramatic choices invaded the confines of the Falls Church theater. During the late sixties and early seventies, as the world around them exploded into turmoil from the civil rights movement to the Vietnam war, Allen found ways to address the issues with theater.

While he refrained from explicitly promoting a point of view, he would choose plays that would in themselves be a discussion. On one occasion his choice got him in trouble when he chose to perform a

production of "Dark of the Moon," a play that about a witch boy who tries to marry a human woman, only to have the townsfolk rape the woman rather than let them be together. It was an implicit discussion about the importance of accepting diversity and the destructiveness of intolerance.

The play started a controversy among some in the school administration who wanted to have Allen fired. But parents formed a group in support of Allen and eventually succeeded in keeping him there. Through all the conflict, none of the students knew anything about it. Allen didn't want them to get caught up in the controversy, though they did start to put a disclaimer in the program when the content warranted.

Allen would go on to teach theater at the high school until 1986, and then taught English for two more years, until he retired in 1988. Even after he ended his teaching career, Allen continued to be a part of his former students' lives. Many continued to contact him by phone at his home in Florida, where he moved with his long-time partner and nationally recognized composer and conductor Thomas Knox, former leader of the Marine Corps Band.

At alumni parties, Pittman said, somebody would inevitably call Allen and they would talk, one after another for hours, and Allen would remember all of them, recalling with surprising accuracy details about each of their lives since graduation. Last year Allen suffered a fall at his home and while recovering caught pneumonia and passed away.

Then, while coming up to Virginia bearing Allen's ashes for a memorial service, Knox passed away quietly on the train. A ceremony was held for both Allen and Knox at the Congressional Cemetery, members of the Marine Band leading a parade playing songs from "Hello Dolly."

But while the door closed on Allen's life, his legacy has lived on in his students, who are working to ensure his impact won't stop with them either. While there was some fall-off in the theater department since Allen left, with several teachers coming in for shorter stints at the school, many of Allen's students see in current drama teacher Steve Barker a reflection of their former teacher, a mantle he has accepted with some apprehension, knowing little about his predecessor.

"It's great to have them totally behind you and supporting you," he said. "But it's also a little overwhelming."

Johnson said that like Allen, he has seen Barker create the same kind of collective atmosphere and work with the same focus empowering his students rather than controlling them. "If you want a student to learn you've got to be the Sancho Panza to their Don Quixote," Barker said, noting that one must be on hand to follow one's students and pick them up when they fall.

"If you don't fail you won't ever learn," Barker added. As part of remembering Allen, the alumni are presently working on naming the Little Theatre – a former cafeteria that Allen converted to use for smaller plays – the Grallen Theatre in recognition of his contribution to the school. They also hope that the awards and \$500 scholarships they have created will do something to support Barker and the Falls Church theater department in their future work, and keeps Allen's name and vision of what theater can be, alive at the school. "What better way to honor his memory than to help kids step out on the next part of their journey," Pittman said.