

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 10, 2001, the following
tribute to the life and service of the late Robert Harris Chapman
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

ROBERT HARRIS CHAPMAN

BORN: April 14, 1919
DIED: September 27, 2000

Robert Harris Chapman, Professor of English Literature, playwright, theatrical consultant, and Director of the Loeb Drama Center, was born in Highland Park, Ill., on 14 April 1919. He attended Princeton University, and graduated with an A.B. degree in English in 1941.

During World War II he served in the U.S. Navy as a Lieutenant in naval intelligence in Europe and North Africa. In 1946 he returned to Princeton University as an Instructor in the Department of English, directing Princeton Triangle Club productions. From 1948 to 1950 he taught at the University of California, Berkeley, as an Instructor in the Department of Dramatic Arts.

In 1950 he arrived at Harvard, first as Instructor, soon becoming Assistant Professor of English. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1956 and to Professor of English Literature in 1967. His courses were popular with undergraduates and included Modern Drama, Playwrighting, Theatre History, British Theatre of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, and George Bernard Shaw.

As a playwright, his plays included "The General," "Hero," "The Troublesome Tourist," and with his Princeton colleague Louis O. Coxe, "Billy Budd," a dramatization of Melville's novella which established his reputation in the theatre. It was produced at an off-Broadway theatre in 1949, and two years later opened on Broadway after he and Mr. Coxe rewrote it. As Chapman recalled years later: "We did it in six days over a barrel of martinis. God, what a wonderful time it was!" The distinguished drama critic Brooks Atkinson in his review in the New York Times noted that "Billy Budd" was "extraordinarily skillful." In the Saturday Review John Mason Brown championed the production by declaring: "Those who did not see 'Billy Budd' did their best to discourage the theatre from doing its best. They turned their backs on courage and distinction." The play ran for three months and almost won the Drama Critics Circle Award, falling two votes short. In 1949-50 Benjamin Britten was thinking of composing an opera based on Melville's story, and the Chapman-Coxe dramatization was extensively consulted by E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier when they wrote the libretto for

Britten. Forster himself corresponded with Chapman during the composition of the opera libretto. A movie version of "Billy Budd" was also produced to great acclaim in 1964, starring Terrence Stamp, Robert Ryan, and Peter Ustinov.

Chapman in the 1950s was commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation to survey theatres and drama schools in the United States and abroad; he also helped plan the drama school at the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in New York. In the 1960s he led a study-tour of German theatre at the invitation of the Federal Republic of Germany, served on a panel to select new American plays for the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, and was a member of the Advisory Council for the Performing Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. In the 1970s he was a consultant-panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps the greatest contribution Chapman made at Harvard was his tenure as the founding Director of the Loeb Drama Center from 1960 to 1980. A Harvard alumnus, Lincoln Kirstein, recommended him as the first Director of the Loeb. Beginning in 1958 Chapman attended the initial meetings of the committee charged by President Pusey to advise the architect Hugh Stubbins on the design for Harvard's theatre. As Director, Chapman's policy was to encourage undergraduates to take initiative by not dictating a policy. As he observed: "The Loeb capitalizes on student interest. The idea is to trust in what students can do, and we keep as light a hand in the productions as possible."

Chapman, however, was also known by undergraduates to be a perfectionist who would not countenance mediocrity in student productions. When he directed a play at the Loeb, as in his production of "Love for Love," the result was striking because he researched the play thoroughly and wanted to achieve an effect that was true to its original details in dress, speech, and décor. Modern interpretations of traditional plays in modern dress and contemporary speech would elicit the feared Chapman sneer of disdain. But undergraduates at the Loeb respected him because they knew that he judged them candidly and professionally.

Students recall vividly their interactions with Chapman, both in the classroom and in the Loeb. A former student, André S. Bishop '70, now artistic director of the Lincoln Center in New York, remembers him as "a very urbane and mild-mannered person. He had the beautiful ability to inspire respect or terror in people." Another former student, author John Updike '54, wrote that although he "didn't take Chapman's popular survey of modern drama [he] did, as a senior, enlist in a seminar on Bernard Shaw, and found it one of [his] happiest Harvard courses." He described Chapman as "an arresting classroom performer, youthfully handsome, with something of a movie star's electric economy of motion and clipped, distinct utterance." Among other undergraduates Chapman taught and advised were actors Tommy Lee Jones and John Lithgow, playwright Arthur Kopit, and directors Peter Sellars and André Gregory.

During his naval service Chapman perfected the fine art of mixing martinis. His martini parties for faculty colleagues and favored undergraduates, both in his rooms in Eliot House B-13 and in his home on Hilliard Street in Cambridge, were legendary. His wartime duty in Morocco also had a lasting effect on him. His office at the Loeb was dubbed “Little Morocco” by his students, as it contained many books on Morocco and his desk featured many Moroccan memorabilia. His apartment had an ornately carved door from Morocco, with the inner space resembling a north African room replete with cushions and low benches where Chapman would meet with students and engage in what one remembered as “passionate conversations about theatre.”

Chapman had only an undergraduate degree from Princeton, although when he received tenure in 1956 he was awarded an honorary A.M. by Harvard. The resounding success of both his teaching and his directorship of the Loeb earned him the esteem of his students and colleagues; he liked to boast that the only other member of the English department similarly lacking in graduate credentials was Harry Levin.

He retired from Harvard in 1989 and went to live in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. He died on 27 September 2000 in the eighty-second year of his age, survived by a large group of devoted friends and former students and by his sister, Joan Chapman, of Davie, Florida.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Brustein
James Engell
Walter Kaiser
Robert Kiely
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