

# IN MEMORIAM

## Jac Alder

December 8, 1934 – May 22, 2015

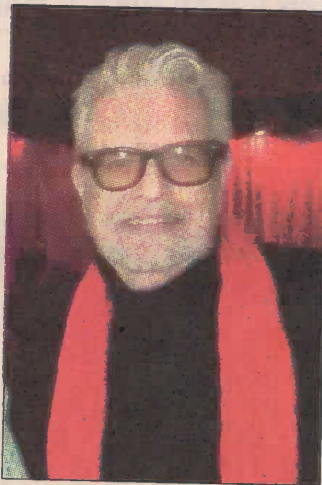
By Shari Goldstein Stern

Dallas lost a legend last week when Jac Alder passed away at the age of 80. He was surrounded by friends at Baylor Hospital, where he suffered from respiratory failure. He had been ill with chronic lymphocytic leukemia for years, but it rarely kept him out of the theatre he loved.

Alder was born on Dec. 8, 1934 in Oklahoma and studied architecture at the University of Oklahoma. He became involved with a touring theater group while serving overseas in the military. That's when he fell in love with theater.

The Okie ended up in Dallas, where Margo Jones' legendary Theatre '47 at Fair Park was the country's first professional theatre-in-the-round. Alder and Jones became great friends as well as artistic colleagues. Theatre '47 closed in 1955 following Jones' death.

Executive Director-Producer of Theatre Three (T3), Alder's name has always been synonymous with "Theatre Three." He was the theater's co-founder with his late wife, Norma



Photos courtesy of the Alder Family

Young, and close friends, Esther Ragland and Robert Dracup. Young passed away in 1998, and T3's main stage bears her name.

The founders breathed life into the theatre-in-the-round in a Sheraton Hotel ballroom, emulating Margo Jones' model. Always up for a challenge, Alder relocated the hotel ballroom theatre to a cozy, former seat cover store on Main Street in what is now Deep Ellum.

It's there that Alder directed two young actresses from Lake Highlands, sisters Cathryn and Patsy McClenny. Cathryn Hartt is now a successful Dallas acting coach with Hartt and Soul Studio. She said:

"I cannot imagine a world without Jac Alder. Heaven must be in need of a good set or score ... or Jac would never have left this place he loved for it."

Hartt's sister, Patsy, went on to gain success and fame as television and film actress Morgan Fairchild. She said: "I would have no career if it were not for Jac Alder and Norma Young. They saw potential in two children who arrived on their doorstep and gave my sister, Cathryn, and me our chance to pursue our dreams. They were tough, taskmasters and gave us fabulous training, filled with love. He offered that gift to so many over the decades, and so many loved him for it. He saw the potential in each of us, and he never lost his sense of humor.

At the time he was hospitalized, Alder was directing "The Liar." B.J. Cleveland has taken over the production, which will run through May 31. On T3's Facebook page, Cleveland expressed what Jac would say, "See you at the theater!"

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Gene Raye Price, who is currently appearing in T2's "The Lady with all the Answers" through June 15, said: "I feel such a sense of profound loss. He was a compassionate, intuitive visionary with a wit that endeared him to me. I loved being with him and I treasure my relationship with him."

As recently as the Sunday before his death, Alder was working with Bruce Coleman, T3's Resident Artist, on the upcoming production of "Kountry Girls," which is scheduled to open June 25 through July 19.

Marty Van Kleeck, manager of the Bathhouse Cultural Center (BHCC) said about Alder: "He was such an advocate, not just for Theatre Three but for every artist in town, and every arts organization in Dallas benefited from his passionate pleas.

He touched so many lives, mentored so many young artists, entertained us on stage, provoked conversation with his choice of plays and provided some of the most wonderful dinner

conversation as a skilled raconteur."

Alder was well known to push boundaries and bring unique theatre to his audiences.

For example, "I Love you, You're Perfect, Now Change" was the longest-running show in Dallas theater history.

T3 President Scott Williams said, "It was not just Theatre Three that Jac championed

— he championed and mentored countless individuals and organizations, donated to scores of other theaters, was a vocal advocate for arts funding in Dallas and Texas, having chaired the Texas Commission on the Arts theater panel and the board of Texas Non-Profit Theatres."

Some of the many playwrights and stage professionals he mentored are Stephen Sondheim and Pulitzer Prize winners Beth Henley, Doug Wright and Tracy Letts.

Williams continued: "Jac was also active in civil rights, being at the forefront of casting African-American actors and a long-standing friend of the



Jac Alder in the early days.

gay community.

He supported arts education, including serving on the President's Council of Booker T. Washington High School for the Visual and Performing Arts and as Director of Drama at the University of Texas at Arlington."

Michael Jenkins, president and managing director of the Dallas Summer Musicals said: "Jac Alder has been a wonderful friend to me for more than 40 years ... every time that I am with him, I learn something. He will be missed, but never forgotten."

Dallas broadcast icon Jody Dean said: "If a kid wanted to make a difference in the theater, he or she

should simply do what Jac Alder did. They'd end up making a difference in the world."

Alder's hospital stay happened to occur at the same time as another devastating loss for T3 and the North Texas arts community when Terry Dobson, T3's former musical director, passed away in April.

Alder is survived by his brothers: Bob Alder and Bruce Alder, both of Denver, Colorado; sisters Norma, Denver and Nora "Happy" Virginia.

T3 is receiving calls and email from patrons who want to know how they can memorialize Alder. According to Van Kleeck, "The best tribute anyone

can make to Jac is to come to the theatre."

At its Tuesday night meeting, the T3 Board of Directors approved a plan that Alder himself had prepared, in which he gave direction regarding his succession.

According to

Scott Williams, president of the board, Marty Van Kleeck was invited to continue in her volunteer role as advisor to the administrative staff. She will remain in her position as Bath House Cultural Center Manager.

"We are grateful to the Office of Cultural Affairs for working with both Theatre Three and the Bath House to ensure smooth operation of both," Williams said.

Bruce Coleman, resident artist, who has been with T3 for 30 years, will continue as Artistic Director.

In February the board began looking for a General Manager to work with Alder. Now they will search

for a Managing Director to work with Coleman.

Alder's brother, Bob, reiterated to the board that Jac's wish was to have his life celebrated with joy, and not as a sad event. With that in mind, the Board scheduled a celebration of Jac Alder's life for Monday, July 13 at the City Performance Hall. Time and other details will be announced later.

Williams said, "Jac wanted it to be a vibrant theatre, and we hope to be good stewards of what Jac and Norma built so we can have another 50 years."

Williams wrote a tribute to Alder, in which he said: "As you reflect back on the extraordinary life of this bundle of artistic energy, please join the board of Theatre Three in giving thanks to Jac Alder for his leadership, his passion and his vision, and make plans to attend a performance on the stage of your choice.

As Jac wrote in one of his monthly columns in *Theater Jones*, he loved that the theatre has 'the ability to inspire our community of both artists and attendees toward visions of common humanity.' Without a doubt, Jac Alder played a leading role in inspiring us all. Bravo!"