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Leonard Leone, father of Wayne State theater, dies at 92

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By **MARTIN F. KOHN**

FREE PRESS THEATER WRITER

On a cold February day in 1933, 18-year-old Leonard Leone tried to join his family's struggling imported-food business in Detroit's Eastern Market. The family, and the business, could use the help but Leone's father declined the offer, told young Leonard he could do better and borrowed \$50 to pay for the first semester of college.

Leonard Leone did do better. He practically created the theater department at Wayne State University—in his early days he was the theater department—establishing its renowned graduate program, the Hilberry Theatre, and setting well-trained artists on the path to great accomplishment, among them Lily Tomlin, S. Epatha Merkerson, Jeffrey Tambor, Ruben Santiago-Hudson and the late Lloyd Richards.

Mr. Leone died Tuesday. A longtime Berkley resident, he was 92.

"He was an incredible man," says Yolanda Fleischer, director, actor and associate professor of theater at University of Detroit Mercy. Fleischer was one of Mr. Leone's graduate students. Even recently, she says, "Whenever I had a question or a doubt I'd go to Leonard. Leonard could tell me. Leonard could light the fire again."

Fleischer is among many of Mr. Leone's former students who have stayed in Michigan to work in theater or theater education. They include Plowshares Theatre founder Gary Anderson, Meadow Brook Theater artistic director and UDM theater professor David Regal, Purple Rose Theatre managing director Alan Ribant and Wayne State theater chair Blair Anderson.

In a 2002 Free Press interview Mr. Leone said he kept in touch with many former students and remarked how much easier that had become with e-mail.

There wasn't even regular air mail when Leone was born, on Sept. 13, 1914, in Highland Park. His family moved to Berkley when he was 2 or 3, and for a time his father ran a movie theater.

"Of course, I always had to act out all the Westerns with the kids in the neighborhood," he recalled, and though he did theater in high school, he never considered a life in the arts.

Although his father hoped he'd become a lawyer Mr. Leone was drawn to theater at Wayne State and stayed on to earn his masters degree. He wrote his thesis on theater in Renaissance Italy.

He landed a job teaching drama at Detroit's Mackenzie High School. Four years later, he and his wife, Berta, moved to California where she had gotten a job as an animator for Walt Disney.

In 1946 Mr. Leone got an offer to teach at Wayne State.

"The offer from Wayne was attractive," Leone says, even though there was no place to perform, no place to build scenery and "I was the only guy on the staff."

Leone began to build a drama department, with the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium serving as a proscenium theater and a rented church hall at Cass and Forest converted into a circular theater.

In the 1950s he convinced the university to acquire the Bonstelle Theatre on Woodward, now used for undergraduate productions.

"The Hilberry begins to come into the picture around 1955-56," Leone recalled. The State Department was seeking applications for its cultural exchange programs, under which American performing artists traveled overseas to show off U.S. culture. Leone applied, hoping to take a small group of students to Europe.

"Lo and behold, I got the call and telegram that we'd been selected. We'd been selected to go to India!"

The tour took place in 1958. The experience of putting five shows together for a three-month tour with 13 student actors and two other staff members proved

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(DETROIT FREE PRESS)

Leonard Leone, of Berkley, founder of Hilberry Theatre at home with one of his many treasures from India. He was there in 1957 to 1958 as director of theatres at WSU. They traveled for months doing 5 plays per week in various locations. He said that the trip was the catalyst for starting the Hilberry when he returned to Detroit. On the left is a large Yali, which was used in religious processional wagons. On the right is another carving from India.

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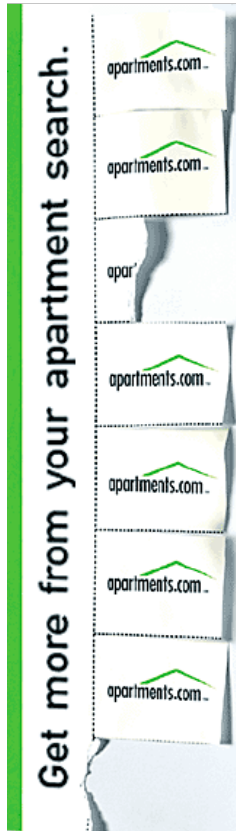
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rewarding. Leone noticed that the more they traveled and performed the different plays, the better the actors got.

"The thought came to my head: Gee, I wish I could do this on campus." That was the beginning of the Hilberry Theatre. The building itself is a former Christian Science church at Cass and Hancock, which also houses the smaller Studio Theatre. The Hilberry is a three-year graduate program whose students earn M.F.A. degrees. Mr. Leone retired in 1985.

His wife died in 2006. He is survived by a son, Leslie; and a daughter, Paula Benedict. No funeral is planned. Wayne State University will hold a memorial service at the Hilberry Theatre. No date has yet been announced.

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