

IN MEMORIAM



Remembering Sue Ann Park

Barry Kur^a and Phyllis E. Griffin^b

^aPenn State University, State College, PA, USA; ^bThe Theatre School at DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA



About Sue Ann Park

Sue Ann Park was the beloved Senior Master Teacher and Director of Training Emerita of The Lessac Research and Training Institute. She died on the morning of Saturday, February 27 2016. She will be remembered as a legend, an icon, a brilliant teacher, and champion of Arthur Lessac's work; an actor, mentor, and trailblazer. She will be truly missed, and her like will not be seen again.

Sue Ann Park had a remarkable career—an accomplished professional actor, director, and teacher even before she became acquainted with Arthur Lessac's work in 1961 while teaching voice at the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago. She received her BS from Syracuse University (speech and drama) and her MFA from the Yale School of Drama. For 43 years, she taught with Arthur, and sometimes without Arthur, but always *sharing* his vision and passion for *sharing* this work with actors, singers, directors, teachers, and anyone who wished to uncover creativity within—using the voice and body.

She co-taught at least 28 Lessac Summer Intensives with Arthur, led countless shorter workshops throughout the years, presented at numerous Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) and Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) conferences, and authored many articles for various publications. Her achievements were recognized with ATHE's Career Achievement Award in Academic Theatre, a Distinguished Life Member by VASTA, and Honorary Member of the Lessac Training and Research Institute.

But nothing was as important to her as the journey she experienced within the work itself. As she stated in her *Vocal Visions* article, "It has been a long and joyous journey of discovery, problem-solving and satisfaction" (Park 1997, 120).

CONTACT Barry Kur  bxk1@psu.edu

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed [here](#).

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We all have benefited tremendously from that journey. Sue Ann, you were our teacher, our mentor and our inspiration. As it says on the crystal face of the Lifetime Achievement award, given to her at our Inaugural Annual Conference in 2006: “The Lessac Training and Research Institute extends heartfelt gratitude to Sue Ann Park for her lifelong devotion to maintaining the highest standards of teaching excellence in Lessac Kinesensic Training.”

From Barry Kur

During my graduate studies in 1974–75 at SUNY Binghamton, I enrolled in two elective courses in theatre with Professor Sue Ann Park. Initially, I thought these courses would be secondary skills for my theatre director training. What I discovered was a method toward enhancing creativity and one’s life behavior.

Sue Ann presented the work with a deep personal commitment and precise clarity that indicated a serious concern for the art of teaching and the art of acting. These topics were of equal concern in my life goals. I saw in her what I had been longing to develop in my theatrical life. I wanted to know how to guide oneself and others in the art of acting and other performance opportunities. She made it easy to grasp and adaptable to one’s full vocal life, and I could tell she worked hard at the teaching process. I had been so inspired by Sue Ann’s instruction of the Lessac Work that I changed my career path and wanted to emulate her. A year later, I was fortunate to be accepted in the intensively immersive certification program at Binghamton.

Many years later, one night in Indiana, during one of our summer workshops, she revealed to me this story of my work as a certification candidate: As certification students in her class, we would sit before her in a semi-circle. I usually sat at one end of the line of chairs. As she was working with one student on a challenging vocal training event, she admitted to me that she was often a bit distracted by my intense focus and nodding of my head as she aided that student. Eventually, she realized that I was silently deciding what I would do for that student if I were the teacher. My distracted nodding at the end of the row was a moment of inner recognition that my silent teaching agreed with what she did. She told me how that evolved from a slight annoyance to a premonition that I had the aptitude to teach the work.

That recollection remains a cherished compliment from a very talented teacher and eventually a colleague. It was her recommendation that gave me the opportunity to begin a career in a graduate actor-training program. I am now a professor emeritus of theatre who specialized in theatre voice and speech training for over 35 years. I could not have accepted the appointment, Lessac Master Teacher, without thinking about the inspiring example that Sue Ann gifted to me. I certainly could never match the orthodoxy of the work with which she lived, but I have continued to teach the work with a similar degree of passion for the art of teaching.¹

From Phyliss Griffin

What I most admired about Sue Ann Park was her tenacity of character on all fronts. What a strong woman, artist, teacher, and leader in the work of Arthur Lessac. To mention Sue Ann is to mention great struggle for women at The Goodman School of

Drama in the late 1960 s. Even though Sue Ann was an MFA graduate of the Yale School of Drama and experienced in the world of voice, speech, and acting, it was a man's world with little to no importance placed on making room for women like Sue Ann and her one other female colleague, Dr. Bella Itkin. These facts had little impact on the boys sharing their power, and I witnessed how she never let them stop her.

An early protégé and advocate of Arthur Lessac's approach to the body, voice, and speech work, she knew her stuff and never showed how the powers that be challenged her as people jostled for positions of power. She stood like a warrior in the winds of oppression toward women, and although shaken at times, she never allowed it to affect her work and what she needed to give us as her students. She was tough. She was fair. She was professional and stood as an example of what it means to be a committed artist and teacher, even if though I (and most of us) did not see it at that time. Most of us were questioning, "What is this work?"

The men in charge took a long time recognizing that Sue Ann could direct, and they took a long time allowing her to take on a workshop, where she used Arthur's work as an acting technique to teach the actors how useful it could be in unifying a theory based on "doing" and the Stanislavski technique. She faced much resistance from her students in the beginning, but she got the job done with many professional actors and the now non and/or retired actors, who still use her work to this day.

Though as students, we did not know what a vanguard leader she was and would become in Arthur's work, many of us came to sense her importance through the content of her work in the classroom. She was a sergeant! Because of her high professional standards as a teacher, we knew we had to pay attention and even, what, practice?

What she faced in the classroom during my time with her was arrogance, indifference, craziness, and an "I'm going to get this no matter what" attitude from the study body. I came in as one of the arrogant ones and the only African American in my class. To her credit, she never made me feel my heritage in a negative way in regard to color. I think through her own personal struggle as a woman; she knew how to give me the psychological space to just be another person in the room. She just made sure that everyone knew who was the teacher in class, that Lessac was an approach that could make you a better actor, and that body, breath, consonants, vowels, calling, and expression were to be used together as a kinesthetic synergy to support us on stage. Over the three years of teaching, she got most us to invest in this approach through trial, error, and practice along with a great deal of patience.

She accomplished this from a place of expertise. She was a master teacher at a very young age, as I look back on my experience with her. The year was 1968. I, in a way, had just walked out of the corn fields of Iowa to live in Chicago. My class was a motley crew of would-be actors and directors from all over the country and the world—many of whom behaved in bizarre and startling ways by my definition. (But that did not become clear to me until I was told years later that most of my classmates loved to experiment with LSD, marijuana, and heroin!) Nevertheless, these were her students, which included those of us who did not know about drugs but were distracted anyway by raging hormones and the political climate the 1960 s. She had serious students sprinkled in among us such as Joey Montenya, Bruce Boxlietner, Hali Gerima, Beverly McGuffin, and others, who all successfully made their way into the industry or other professional careers successfully. She trained us so well that we knew what to do when we were in trouble with our voices or

even in our acting. In this environment, she was a very successful teacher, and to this day, I am thankful I had the opportunity to be exposed to her expertise over a number of years.

She was, in a very short period of time, able to convince me, that practicing voice and speech was fun! First love, consonants! Second love, vowels! Third love and most confusing of all calling with believability. I stayed on it, went to summer Lessac Institutes, and later became certified to teach it. It was she who artfully opened the door to many of her diverse and multi-talented students, inviting them to grow in the work. I will always be thankful that once upon a time, a long time ago, I entered a classroom that contained a genius of a voice and speech teacher, who (quietly and unbeknownst to me) launched me into a similar career. I am still reaching to obtain her level of expertise in the classroom. The process of doing that has brought me great joy and made me a better human being with much self-reflection along the way. Her passing has deepened my reflection, and I shall fall into silence here to more intimately say: Thank you, Sue Ann Park. You shall not be forgotten by me.²

The Sue Ann Park Endowment Fund

After Sue Ann Park's death in 2016 and in honor of her 40-year commitment to the pursuit, growth, and evolution of the Lessac Kinesensic Voice and Body Training, the Board of Trustees of the Lessac Training and Research Institute established the Sue Ann Park Endowment Fund (SAP). This fund is dedicated to providing Lessac Institute Intensive Workshop participants with tuition reductions based upon demonstrated financial need.

This endowment was established through a four-year fundraising drive, growing from an initial amount of \$5,000 USD and now exceeds \$20,000 USD. Prior to the establishment of this endowment, the Institute offered somewhat limited financial assistance from operating funds and/or individual donations

There are additional photos Sue Ann Park. (See Figures S1-S5, online supplementary materials.) These photos include an early acting headshot and photos with Sue Ann teaching in her mid-career, presenting at the 2006 Lessac Conference, performing as Lady Bracknell, and sitting beside Arthur Lessac.

Notes

1. These remarks were first presented by Barry Kur at the 2016 VASTA Conference, The Theatre School—DePaul University, Chicago, for a memorial event for Sue Ann Park.
2. These remarks were first presented by Phyllis E. Griffin at the 2016 VASTA Conference, The Theatre School—DePaul University, Chicago, for a memorial event for Sue Ann Park.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors



Barry Kur is Professor Emeritus, Penn State University School of Theatre and Master Teacher, Lessac Training and Research Institute. Voice/speech specialist for 30 years at Penn State's BA, BFA and MFA performance programs and served as the school's Associate Director. For the Lessac Institute, Kur serves as Director of Certification and leads the Teacher Training Workshops and One Week Introductory Workshops. He has had teaching residencies in South Africa, New Zealand, UK, and Croatia. Kur authored *Stage Dialect Studies- A Continuation of the Lessac Approach to Actor Voice and Speech Training*. He has coached for over 100 productions including: Asolo Theatre, Fulton Playhouse, Bloomsburg Theater Ensemble Pennsylvania Centre Stage and Delaware Rep. He is the recipient of Penn State's George W. Atherton Award for Teaching Excellence and the Lessac Institute's Leadership Award. Kur was a founding board member of VASTA and served as its third President. He is also a past-president of the Lessac Training and Research Institute.



Phyllis E. Griffin is an Associate Professor of The Theatre School at DePaul University, teaches undergraduate and graduate conservatory actors voice and speech, and directs in the school. Professor Griffin works as a professional director and actor and has a long-standing career as an academic and professional voice and acting coach. She was taught by Professor Sue Ann Park who gracefully introduced her to the Lessac Method of body and voice when Professor Griffin was a student at The Goodman School of Drama: Art Institute of Chicago. Professor Griffin attributes her longevity to the teaching of voice and speech to Arthur Lessac's method and Professor Sue Ann Park brilliant instruction of his method.

Reference

Park, Sue Ann. 1997. "Voice as a Source of Creativity." In *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice by 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches & Directors*, edited by Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker, 97–125. Montclair, NJ: Applause.