

IN MEMORIAM



Remembering Rocco Dal Vera

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If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants – Isaac Newton.
(as quoted in Turnbull 1959, 416)



About Rocco Dal Vera

Rocco Dal Vera died peacefully on Friday, September 29 2017, surrounded by close family and friends, after battling glioblastoma cancer. He was the loving husband to his wife of 27 years, Denise Mechelle Dal Vera, and devoted father to his daughter Kendall Anne Dal Vera. Born July 10 1956, he was 61 years old.

Rocco was Professor of Acting and Division Head for acting, arts administration, dance, musical theatre, opera and theatre design and production at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music (CCM). An internationally acclaimed voice and speech specialist, Rocco was recently awarded the title of Distinguished Member by the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA)—the highest honor given by the organization. Rocco lectured internationally on vocal violence and the effects of emotion on the voice, and he was a Level 5 Master Teacher of the Alba Method for Emotions, having studied and taught the technique for over 20 years. An award winning author, his books are used in over 600 drama and theater schools, with titles including *Voice: Onstage and Off* (co-authored with Robert Barton), nominated as the Best New Theatre Publication by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course* (co-authored with Joe Deer). The company he founded with his wife Denise and friend Annie

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Fitzpatrick, IWA (Influencing Without Authority) Strategies, provides corporate training for companies including Proctor and Gamble and Cincinnati Bell in areas of communication, emotional intelligence, vocal image, leadership, and teamwork.

Beyond the ordinary

The description of Rocco's career highlights alone would qualify anyone as a giant in the voice field. What made Rocco extraordinary was that he went far beyond these accomplishments. He was equally remarkable for his ability to mentor, lead, and inspire his fellow teachers, actors, and colleagues in the VASTA organization. He was able to bring together people from seemingly opposing viewpoints into a shared vision, and he had a boundless energy and spirit, which called for us to better our work and ourselves. Countless people in the voice and speech world (as well as other fields) would reach out for his wisdom and advice. Like his heart and generous spirit, his door was always open.

Rocco saw voice and theatre work as a “big top tent” where we are all invited and where we each have something to contribute and share. He always approached another practitioner as someone he could learn from no matter their background or training. Rocco showed this through his immense contributions to VASTA, working as a board member, conference presenter, and Founding Editor of the *Voice and Speech Review (VSR)*. He did all of this service with his same selfless and enthusiastic style, seeking to empower other VASTAns.

Phil Thompson (2017) wrote in a personal email to Julia Guichard

In 1998 I started as Secretary [at VASTA] and at every board meeting Rocco was present to give a report on the *Voice and Speech Review*. He was inventing this new and impossible job, and he spoke thoughtfully, realistically and inspirationally about its growth at every step. I don't recall him ever pointing out that it was his invention, or his will that was calling it into being. He was just there trying to help it get off the ground so that we could have something that would serve our community.

Creating the *VSR* was a herculean undertaking. Now we VASTAns may take for granted its very existence, but Rocco's call to us in his first editorial was to create a legacy:

Together we can make this Journal a success. We work hard to have our actors heard, felt, and understood on stage. It is just as important that our ideas be heard, felt, and understood – in print. In theatre, each performance is unique and fleeting. It lasts only one night. Your words on the page can influence our work for generations. (Dal Vera 2000, 4)

The *VSR* has allowed VASTAns to share their knowledge, has given our profession more legitimacy in scholarly circles, and most important, has provided an outlet to find and express our own voices.

Rocco also helped to promote the voice and speech profession through his professional work. Rocco would talk about the advantages of certain methodologies and was so well-versed in them that one often saw him instantly adjust his teaching to serve the actor in the most efficient and effective manner. Anne Schilling (2017) wrote in an email, “Rocco was never interested in guru status. He was only interested in empowering people to believe in themselves and their craft.” He wanted to empower the actor to be free to carry on without him, not to be dependent on him as a coach. He was always focused on those he was working with or talking to and how he could best help them.

His coaching career was the envy of anyone in our profession. For 16 seasons, he was a resident vocal coach for the Tony-Award winning Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and

the Actors Theatre of Louisville. He was a resident artist at the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company and the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, and he worked as a voice and speech coach at numerous theatres around the U.S. including the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Human Race Theatre Company, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Long Beach Civic Light Opera, and the Los Angeles Theatre Center. He was often referred to as “the oracle,” and when a question or problem came up actors would say, “Let’s consult the oracle!” and call him.

From D’Arcy Smith

I was lucky enough to have spent three years driving down to Cincinnati from Dayton to watch Rocco Dal Vera teach. At the time, I taught two sections of freshman actors: one class on Monday and one on Tuesday. I would teach my Monday class, drive down, and watch Rocco teach, and then he would completely revamp my lesson plans for the next day. By the end of the term, the Tuesday class was so far ahead that I had to switch the students’ schedule, so the Monday class could catch up. Just watching Rocco work changed my teaching methods and approach. His lessons not only benefited me as a teacher, his mentorship also benefited students he never even met.

There is a Maori phrase for when a chief dies, “Kua hinga te totara i te wao nui a Tane.” Loosely in English this means, “A great tree has fallen in the forest of Tane.” That perfectly captures how I feel about him and his contributions. We have lost a great tree with deep roots. My good friend Tom McCrory (2017) said to me, “No doubt the absence of his sheltering canopy will mean you feel the rain on your head and for a time feel small, but I am sure it is an invitation from him to grow into the light.” He is right. Rocco would want us to grow into the light. To grow to be our best selves. Rocco was not sentimental, but he perfectly understood sentiment. Rocco, I hope I can be half the teacher you were and help even half the people you have helped. I, like many others, will miss growing under you.

From Julia Guichard

I met Rocco when I attended my first VASTA conference in 2000. When my tablemate at the welcome dinner found out I was from Cincinnati, she exclaimed, “Oh, you need to meet Rocco,” and immediately took me to find him. In under a minute, I found myself happily agreeing to work as his production editor on the third edition of the *Voice & Speech Review*. He made it sound like fun, as he did most things. (For the record, it *was* fun, and also one of the hardest jobs I have ever done.) He became my mentor, as he did for so many. Over the next 17 years, I studied with him, collaborated with him on projects and presentations, and sought his advice countless times. Whenever I would call, he would answer with, “Hey, how are you doing” with such a tone of delight that I felt as though he had just been sitting around waiting for me to call, as if there was no one else in the whole world he would rather talk to at that exact moment, although I knew full well he had many more important things to do. He, Denise, and Kendall became dear friends to me and my husband, Stirling. As I look back over pictures of life events (cookouts, birthday parties, anniversaries, my tenure party), Rocco is there, always smiling with genuine delight. I would not be who I am professionally or personally without him. He believed in me, challenged me, supported me, and cheered my successes. He taught me about presence, about kindness, and about the joy

of work. We have lost a brilliant mind, no doubt, but that is not what really hurts. Rocco, I will miss your smile, your laugh, and your heart most of all.

These are our personal stories of Rocco, but hundreds, if not thousands of Rocco's students, colleagues, mentees, and friends have a version of this same story. That is who Rocco was, not for a select few but for everyone he encountered. Joy (Carreon Lanceta) Coronel, a CCM alum and now a voice and speech professional in New York City, posted a lovely tribute to Rocco on her Facebook account (2017) in which she wrote:

I've always selfishly believed that I was Rocco's favorite student. I believed with all my heart that all of his efforts and concerns revolved around me, and I felt incredibly special for it. From an objective perspective, he believed in me more than I ever, EVER believed in myself, and he always lifted me to a level where I never felt I truly belonged. But he believed in me ... so I kind of had to believe in me too. And so I thought, I MUST be his favorite student. I thought all of this because, in the moments that we spent together, this was absolutely true. The fact of the matter is, Rocco gave 100% of attention and wisdom to each of us when we were in his presence. He gave it to us with compassion, with complete dedication and seriousness.

The story goes on

So many of us secretly believed we were his favorite, that we were special. That was the magic of Rocco. And each of us now holds a bit of that magic in our soul. One day I (D'Arcy) said to him, "Rocco, how can I repay you for all you have done? Can I do anything for you?" His response was to laugh and say, "Thank you, the best thing you can do is to pay it forward."

Through his work with VASTA, teaching actors, and mentoring the next generation of voice teachers, he has transformed us and our profession. We stand upon his shoulders. His call to action was to pay it forward. We invite you to do the same.

Notes on contributors



D'Arcy Smith is an associate professor of voice, speech, and dialects at the University of Cincinnati (CCM). He was resident voice, text and dialect coach at the Guthrie Theater and has worked as a teacher and voice/dialect coach in the United States, U.K., Canada, and New Zealand. He has taught at The Central School for Speech and Drama, Toi Whakaari (NZ Drama School), University of Minnesota, the Canadian National Voice Intensive, and at York University. He has also worked as a voice and dialect coach with numerous professional theaters including: Cincinnati Playhouse, Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, Actors Theatre Louisville, American Players Theatre, The Jungle, Theatre Latte Da, Park Square, Penumbra, Children's Theatre Company, Illusion Theatre, Circa Theater, Taki Rua, and others.



Julia Guichard is an associate professor and chair of theatre at Miami University. She holds a BFA in acting from the Goodman School of Drama at DePaul University in Chicago and an MFA in acting from the Pennsylvania State University. She is also a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique, holding certificates from The Performance School and Alexander Technique International. She has worked as a professional movement and vocal coach for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, Actor's Theatre of Middletown, CATCO in Columbus, and others. Most recently, Julia coached actors in two independent

regional film projects, Monumental and UFO. She has served VASTA in various roles including: production editor and associate editor of the Voice and Speech Review, chair of the teaching and learning committee, a VASTA Fellow, and on the board of directors.

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