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Richard Williams

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Dick Williams was a massive influence on generations of local professional and amateur actors, budding musicians and many followers of the arts and drama in the areas of Waltham Forest and south west Essex. He died peacefully in Whipps Cross Hospital on February 18, surrounded by his close and loving family. He was 91.

His drama school in Greenleaf Road, Walthamstow, referred to as the Settlement, nurtured generations of young aspiring actors into the professional ranks and to outstanding achievements in the country's foremost amateur companies.

Born on January 29, 1916, Williams studied at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama, gaining such honorary degrees to his name as LGSM and LRAM. His home in Orford Road, E17, where the doors were always open, is where his own Modern College of Music and Drama exists to this day. It has been an oasis of peaceful tranquility and creativity since the the Second World War, with its music studios and tiny stage and auditorium in still constant use.

I remember his huge road safety pageant for the borough of Wanstead & Woodford in 1947 or thereabouts, his open-air productions of Shakespearean plays in my parents' open-air theatre, the Wilderness, in the forties and early fifties, and ever since, drawing huge crowds over many decades to the lovely Willow Cottage. As an actor, his professional career was born in the seaside concert party traditions of the late twenties and early thirties - his performances as Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream are in my mind as fine an interpretation of the role as I will probably ever witness. A great performer of monologues, to see him stand up and recite from memory at his 90th anniversary celebrations brought wonder and tears to my eyes.

In the late forties, he gave me the encouragement and enthusiasm to enter into a theatrical career lasting more than half a century. Many of his students were inspired to take up professionally not only acting, but production, management and in my case in later years, stage lighting design.

Last year, the Borough of Waltham Forest awarded him a civic honour for his services and contribution to drama and music in the area ranging over almost three-quarters of a century.

On a personal note, in all my association with Dick Williams from my own childhood and early student days to catching up with him in later years, never have I known a teaching and director figure with such positive optimism, humour and delight. Never have I heard a harsh word from his lips. He possessed a forever joyous and happy personality.

He was a unique theatrical father-figure of his time to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young east Londoners in the post-war years. I was very fortunate to be one of them.

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