



Alain Seznec

March 20, 1930 – February 21, 2017

Alain Seznec, emeritus professor of Romance studies, former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and former University Librarian, died at home in Ithaca on February 21, 2017 after a lingering illness. He was 86. Alain who was born in Paris, March 20, 1930, and educated in France, came first to the U.S. with his family as they fled German occupied France in 1940. Alain studied at a French lycée in Canada during the long years of the war. At the war's end the family returned to France, where Alain finished his education at the Sorbonne where he graduated with two degrees; one in Law and another in Letters. Alain Seznec returned to the U.S. first as a lecturer at Harvard. Then, in 1958 Alain joined the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor in the Department of Romance Studies. Alain's main area of academic focus was the French seventeenth-century. He was a particularly fervent admirer of the great dramatists of that era, Molière, Corneille and Racine. His edition of *La Princesse de Clèves* was another example of his love of and help in celebrating the glories of French neo-Classicism.

“Alain's keen-eyed Gallic wit made him a great citizen of the college and university and a wonderful friend,” said Don Randel, the Given Foundation Professor of Musicology Emeritus, former Cornell provost and former dean of Arts and Sciences. “He could deflate the inflated and represent insistently those humanistic values that are, or ought to be, at the heart of the university. In his several roles, he was a steadfast advocate for the best in liberal education. And he was marvelously good company.”

"When I came to Cornell more than 30 years ago, Alain Seznec was more than a guide and mentor. He was an educator with a mission," said David Feldshuh, professor of theater. "As an experienced actor who loved theater, Alain encouraged me and my colleagues to create

productions in the new Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts that exemplified Cornell's dedication to great plays, past and present, produced to engage a diverse and enthusiastic audience. His message to me was succinct: 'Great plays. Well done. Fill the seats.'

During his long tenure as a faculty member, Seznec served in numerous positions, including chairman of the Committee on Residential Colleges, member of Cornell's Commission on Undergraduate Education, and director of undergraduate studies for the Department of Romance Studies. He was also active as an amateur thespian, performing with the Cornell French Players. As a professor and administrator Seznec was passionate about the importance of teaching and was honored with the Clark Distinguished Teaching Award.

"He was a superb teacher, admired and respected by generations of students and alumni," said Glenn Altschuler, the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies, who co-taught a Cornell Adult University theater course with Seznec. "In everything he said and did, Alain Seznec was a great gentleman." Seznec was named associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and director of Cornell's six-year Ph.D. program in 1969, and he became dean of Arts and Sciences in 1978.

"Those who knew Alain as a marvelous teacher, a resolutely upbeat colleague and an accomplished actor may have been surprised to discover, when he took the helm of the College of Arts and Sciences, that he was also a superb administrator," said Philip Lewis, emeritus professor of French literature and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. "His savvy leadership enabled the college not only to emerge from a deep structural budget deficit but to launch a long-term program for rehabilitating its major buildings. Subsequently his human qualities--great warmth coupled with firm rationality--were invaluable when he served as University Librarian during a period of rapid transition. His long career of unfailingly constructive contributions on many fronts is the stuff of which Cornell legends are made."

As dean, Seznec oversaw the building of the Performing Arts Center (renamed the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts in 2001). Keith Johnson '56, former chairman of the college's advisory council, noted in 1986 that "Alain was the most persistent and enthusiastic advocate of [the Arts Center's] construction, and I think it's sort of a monument to him."

After stepping down as dean in 1986, Seznec was appointed University Librarian. He told the Cornell Alumni News that a library "is a place of discovery. It is an extension of the classroom or the lab. It reaches out—through its holdings and the service and guidance of its librarians—and shows you a world you didn't know was there."

During his 10-year tenure as University Librarian – he stepped down in 1996 – Seznec oversaw many important developments, including the library's first online integrated library system in 1986, the construction of the Carl A. Kroch Library in 1990, and the opening of the underground special collections library in 1992, housing the newly formed Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections and the Asia collections. During Seznec's administration, the library's acquisitions budget rose to more than \$7.8 million a year and the library grew to more than six million volumes.

Anne Kenney, current University Librarian, said that “among other things, we have his political acumen and fundraising ability to thank for the construction of Kroch Library,” she said. “A traditionalist at heart, he nonetheless championed the Library’s investment in digital research and development. He was also a gentleman, bon vivant, and a wonderful conversationalist.”

Seznec was an avid fan of all things Cornell and a devoted follower of Cornell athletics, attending hundreds of football, hockey, and lacrosse games. He traveled and fundraised exhaustively for the University.

He is survived by his wife of 66 years, Janet (Grade) Seznec; five children Anne Carignani, Peter Seznec ('74), Catherine Rentz, Dominique Lightbody ('82) and Michael Seznec ('85); and 11 beloved grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Seznec is predeceased by his parents, Jean and Simone Seznec and Genevieve Seznec, and a daughter, Caroline.

Written by Mitchell Greenberg and Linda Glaser