



## **David Bathrick**

April 17, 1936 – April 30, 2020

Cornell University's Jacob Gould Schurman professor emeritus of Theatre, Film & Dance and German Studies, David Bathrick (April 17, 1936–April 30, 2020) was an exemplary and influential citizen of the College of Arts & Sciences, the university committees and communities he served—at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and, for the lion's share of his career, at Cornell—and the world. An outstanding scholar with a multidisciplinary range, he chaired his two home departments at Cornell, German Studies and Theatre, Film & Dance (as Performing & Media Arts was previously configured) with verve and eminent good judgment. He was an inspiring, beloved teacher of undergraduate and graduate students, and a generous mentor to faculty, deans, and a provost. He also co-taught a popular weekend theater course in New York City to appreciative Cornell Adult University participants, who admired his vast knowledge of German and American history and his exceptional ability to make insights from cultural theory accessible to audiences from all walks of life.

Disdaining all pretense, except for the acting that belongs on stage or screen, David had a disarming passion for robust debate, good storytelling, social justice, and the boxing ring. The Public

Broadcasting System's television documentary *The Fight* benefited from his deep knowledge about the racialized politics of 1930s boxing in the United States and Nazi Germany, for example, as he commented on historic matches between Joe Louis, the first Black heavyweight champion of the world since Jack Johnson, and Max Schmeling, who had been Hitler's favorite to win.

"Expect the unexpected," a colleague once wrote appreciatively of David. This imperative applies to his biography and scholarship alike. Raised in the New England town that inspired a cinematic indictment of American anti-Semitism in 1947 (*Gentlemen's Agreement*), he was a football linebacker for Dartmouth College and a Marine Corps reservist at different times, discovering divided Germany as a young student in the 1950s and becoming a dedicated anti-Vietnam War activist in the 1960s.

As a doctoral student of German language and literature at the University of Chicago, he was awarded a research fellowship to spend 1967-68 in Berlin, Germany, where he focused on the theater archives and living legacy of Bertolt Brecht, Germany's most influential and controversial playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Living with his young family in West Berlin, David crossed the Iron Curtain into East Berlin daily to pursue documents and performances related to Brecht's non-dogmatic approach to aesthetics and politics. David's ability to traverse otherwise untraversable divides—in thought and space—became a signature feature of his scholarship and made him a leading expert on 20<sup>th</sup>-century German cultures of anti-fascist and anti-dictatorial dissidence. His feisty inclination to consider all perspectives rigorously and above all to think outside the box confounded the intelligence agencies of both communist and capitalist governments. In an ironic twist, East Germany's surveillance police dubbed David "Diabolo" in secret files, presumably signaling the western "devil" they saw in him but invoking a popular juggling device with the misspelling instead.

David received his Ph.D. in 1970 and rapidly became a maverick giant in international German Studies, in arenas ranging from theater, film, and literature to theories of culture, society, and media.

He was repeatedly at the forefront in breaking down Cold War barriers to scholarly exchange and critical thought, both personally and intellectually. Especially drawn to analyzing radical cultures of spectatorship—in theater, film, sport, and the public sphere—he was a major figure of Brecht Studies and renowned internationally for his book *The Powers of Speech*. This study analyzed the complex “polysemia” of oppositional writing in East German culture during and after the Cold War, including in the avant-garde oeuvre of Heiner Müller, Germany’s most important (and surprisingly postmodern) Marxist playwright since Brecht. Illuminating revolutionary aesthetics in relation to state power, this book garnered a distinguished professional book prize from the German Studies Association. Other specializations included German cinema of both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, as well as German-Jewish Studies and Holocaust memory since the defeat of European fascism in 1945. Always probing the blind spots of academic perspective, David at one point contemplated a book project on the thorny role of love stories in Nazi cinema.

A keystone of David’s overarching influence on interdisciplinary German Studies is the vital role he played in co-founding *New German Critique* in 1973 and co-editing this scholarly journal as long as he was able. One of the most widely read journals in the field since its heady inception, at the nearby Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin, amidst New Left fervor of the 1970s, *New German Critique* has been a major conduit for introducing Anglophone audiences to the Frankfurt School of German cultural and progressive political theory known as Critical Theory, which interrogated modern critical thought and aesthetics in response to capitalism, fascism, genocide, exile, migration, and the ongoing transformations of mass media, art forms, and social life. David and *New German Critique* also played indispensable roles in establishing the innovative field of GDR Studies in the US, a field that explores the culture, art, and politics of the communist side of divided Germany. The journal also featured feminist approaches to German culture early on. All three arenas—German Critical Theory, GDR Studies, and feminist German Studies—were seen as highly controversial at the time.

Realizing that the UN did not recognize East and West Germany as full member countries until 1973, and that feminist literary theory was only beginning to be discussed in the 1970s, one appreciates the visionary quality of David's intellectual commitments, in both his research and the journal he helped sustain for nearly 50 years. When he left his Madison professorship in 1987, which he had held since 1970, to accept a senior position at Cornell, the College of Arts & Sciences was honored to recruit him for the remainder of his career and to welcome the journal operations he brought with him. The Department of German Studies remains honored to maintain its affiliation with *New German Critique* as the journal continues to address the desiderata of German Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

David made many contributions to the overall development of German Studies, especially when this field of literary studies first expanded its focus to include studies of German culture more broadly. His clarion calls for the Modern Language Association and the American Association of Teachers of German to redefine the field in progressive ways helped create many new opportunities for younger generations of teachers and scholars and contributed to a sea change in the field. Generations of graduate students were drawn to work with David for his activist orientation to texts and performances, for his high standards coupled with supportive availability, and for his warmth and humanity. Many student projects intersected with David's specializations in 20th-century German Studies. Others ranged farther afield, including for example studies of British playwright Harold Pinter, images of America in contemporary Chinese drama, and theater work with inmates in American prisons. Brechtian theory and practice form a red thread running through many of the dissertations and careers David mentored, as did the graduate student involvement he invited in the professional curation of *New German Critique*.

David's capacious interests took him well beyond German Studies. From 1995-2002 he chaired the Department of Theatre, Film & Dance (now Performing & Media Arts), where he was always cheerfully available to talk in any setting and even performing on stage. Beloved and respected at every level, he offered generous mentorship, stories of activism and survival, and sage counsel on

changing the institution while staying happy within it. His legendary collection of VHS tapes of otherwise unavailable films was an invaluable resource. Combined with his radically egalitarian ethos, his deep knowledge, passion, and enthusiasm helped show students as well as colleagues what kinds of persons they wanted to be and nurtured new generations of scholars in the cross-disciplinary fields of theater, performance, cinema, and media studies.

From 2004 on, David also played an essential role in creating a unique online resource based in Cornell University Library and expanded with the library's ongoing support. Widely acclaimed and openly accessible to a global public, "Alexander Kluge: Cultural History in Dialogue" is one of Cornell's most innovative projects in the digital humanities. Devoted to Kluge as a multi-medial polymath and critical theorist in dialogue with German cultural history, this bilingual digital archive features films, texts, and interviews by Kluge with other major postwar artists and thinkers such as Heiner Müller, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Anselm Kiefer, Oskar Negt, and Miriam Hansen. Continuing to grow and seeding new research in many fields, this project also benefits from affiliations with the University of Bremen, Princeton University, and Kluge himself.

David, who retired from Cornell's teaching faculty in 2007, will remain sorely missed by students, colleagues, family, and friends around the globe. We remember him as a distinguished scholar, brilliant interlocutor, and extraordinary human being who, even when he was being provocative, was also loving, generous, funny, and warm. His legacy lives on.

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*Photo by Robert Barker*