

Bob Potter, 1934-2010

Playwright, Poet, Political Activist, UCSB Professor

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Even people who knew Bob Potter personally and well won't easily separate him from the many remarkable things he accomplished. Bob, who died at home with most of his family near last Saturday, July 11, was a poet whose confessional works often skillfully meshed delicate observations with humor and insight—contemplating the end of a war from his office window on a lagoon, say, or describing the seagulls in the Santa Barbara dump.

Bob also did theater from almost every pore of his body: As a playwright, he created 30-plus works, from *Where Is Sicily?* in 1969 to *The Last Days of Empire* in 2008, which frequently rose from his scouring political conscience, but always provided ingenious settings, from the classical world to the Hollywood he had known intimately since birth.

Photo Gallery

Bob Potter



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Bob's protagonists might be corrupt policemen, cockroaches, or clones, but his work was always human and humanist. As a producer, half of the dynamism that is *Dramatic Women*, Bob and spouse, Ellen Anderson, did more than anyone I know to give voice to people here who hitherto were not encouraged out of the corners and into the spotlights, from university professors to chefs. In 15 plays (many their own, admittedly), Bob and Ellen tirelessly promoted drama as community. Still other people knew Bob as a UCSB professor, at first in the English department, later in theater, and finally almost a department unto himself, fiendishly working the lucky novices who wandered into his inspiring orbital pull.

Though born in New York in the midst of the Depression, Bob was raised in Brentwood, California. (He was surprised when he first discovered that other people didn't live in SoCal mansions.) Bob's father was the great Hollywood director H.C. Potter, whose films include *The Farmer's Daughter* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. Growing up with Myrna Loy as houseguest certainly made an impression on Bob, though his personality DNA was probably altered by a number of Episcopal bishops in the family tree, too. A conscience-smitten thespian might be struck from such a mold.

Bob studied English literature at Pomona College in 1952 during the years of the Hollywood blacklist, experiencing firsthand the era's political hypocrisies. But he was radicalized while traveling in South America three years later, where he closely observed the cruel lies of U.S. foreign policy. A stint in Army Intelligence reinforced this perception. After a brief San Francisco *boheme*, Potter married his first wife and entered Claremont Graduate College, where he embarked, to his own surprise, on a flourishing academic career that brought him here in the young days of UCSB. Seminal events of the times also shaped his life, from the Kennedy assassination to Vietnam protests and the riots in Isla Vista. As he was educating young minds, he readily admitted that his own life was influenced by his classrooms full of "increasingly strange-looking and exotic students." Without doubt, Bob Potter played an integral role in the freedom-spirited counterculture slouching toward Isla Vista to be born.

Because Bob's other compelling pursuit was political activism. He was a firsthand witness to the riots, in the trenches. Afterward, with economist Jim Sullivan, Bob proudly co-authored a report entitled "The Campus by the Sea Where the Bank Burned Down," definitively assessing the turmoil for the President's Commission on Campus Unrest. He was a lifelong Democrat, active in the party, and recently worked hard for the Obama campaign. But his most public political work was the peace movement, which he did not abandon after Vietnam.

Where most people, myself included, decried the invasion of Iraq, perhaps taking pride in early condemning it, Bob was on State Street every Saturday, marching. Among other activities, he was a great friend of the profound Arlington West Memorial, offering both physical support and words in a moving poem about "... the crosses and the grizzled veterans / Who tend them like a flowered garden of regret."

It may indeed be impossible to separate Bob Potter from his many activisms. Yeats famously despaired of separating "the dancer from the dance," and Bob's son Daniel joked the other day about not being able to envision his father without some project before him. But it has to be acknowledged that what most of us friends, his five bereaved children and stepchild, and his wife and three former wives (his life was complicated) knew best is that what lay under all of his activities: an unquenchable kindness. Bob was supportive—at times, we all knew him to be vehemently argumentative in his supportiveness, but ultimately kind. He also responded with great favor to people he witnessed being kind. His work—dramatic, poetic, scholarly, political, and all of it personal—was more wellspring than pastime. In his last days, he expressed great satisfaction that friends and family were helping assemble an edition of his favorites, titled *Six Plays*, even as the prostate cancer that took him cut down this seemingly inexhaustible capacity for creative work.

Bob was glad to leave a legacy, which we will all enjoy, too, once we get a little less sad about him gone. But I suspect that it will be his radiant human decency and his genuine respect and love for other people that we will find, in our memories of him and all the things we see he did.

Here is a poem that Bob Potter wrote about Arlington West.

Three Thousand Deaths

Exactly three thousand white crosses
Symmetrically fixed in rows of forty-eight
Aligned at attention across a sandy beach

Vastly understate the reality.

Fleeting symbols of a Sunday afternoon,
Garnished with California seagulls, and a soft breeze
Coaxing tiny sailboats from the yacht harbor,
They shine in the sunlight, astonishing the tourists.

Bypassers from L.A. and the Valley, gawking New Yorkers,
Aussies and Londoners, Dutchmen and Turks,
Gabblers in Farsi, Japanese, Hindi
And all varieties of Spanish pause to contemplate
The irresistible photo opportunity of Death.

As the digital cameras whiz, zip and flash,
Catching the poignant sight, disposing of its brief shock,
Children wonder if there are bodies in the sand,
Then, reassured and disappointed, are led off for an ice cream.

If there were three thousand deaths here
Instead of these chaste memorial place markers,
Three thousand rotted blood-soaked dismembered corpses
Of former American boys and girls from the small towns and barrios,
The squandered assets of bemedaled Generals
Riddled with bullets, blown to pieces, mouths agape,
Strewn chaotically, catastrophically across an invasion beach
Of reality, crashed in our midst in a terrible tsunami
Flooding the beaches and the streets, dashed
Across our suburban lawns, stinking up the schoolyards,
Polluting the supermarkets, poisoning the churches,
Assaulting our ears, offending our nostrils, raping our eyes
With an obscene actuality not seen on TV —
This atrocity dutifully unleashed on our orders — well then,
Something would have to be done about it.

But as it is, the crosses and the grizzled veterans
Who tend them like a flowered garden of regret
Are the matter of a brief moment
For onlookers with other destinations,
And the ignorant carnage grinds on,
Eleven time zones away, receding
Into the forgetful future of a careless empire.

—*Bob Potter*