

FACEBOOK TRIBUTES

ERIC BENTLEY

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Re “*the teacher who changed your life*” post making the Facebook rounds: No contest, from *my life* — It's ERIC BENTLEY, 99-year-old Theatre critic, scholar, playwright.

. . . Taking advantage of the GI Bill, after my Korean War Army stint, I enrolled in the MFA program at Columbia and took Bentley's Theatre Lit course and was introduced (and in depth) to the playwrights Brecht, Buchner, Cocteau, Lorca, Giraudoux, Grabbe, de Musset, Sternheim, Yeats, O'Casey, Eliot — many others who were then shaping the modern playwriting sensibility. We also explored the plays of writers (I thought) I knew well: Ibsen, Shaw, Pirandello, Strindberg, Sartre.

. . The course was being given at the time when *WAITING FOR GODOT* exploded onto the Broadway scene. I saw Becket's masterpiece on opening night (last row in the balcony). So did Eric (orchestra seats, I suspect). The *GODOT* lecture in class the next day was memorable, priceless. Heady time for a young playwright. All those great playwrights — especially Buchner — influenced my style.

. . . But Eric's teaching style was also an influence. He had a light voice (in a large lecture room). So I sat up close. Often he would go off on an internal riff, as if developing some idea for a future essay. I felt fortunate to be let in on his internal riffs. They were spontaneous, in the moment. Others in class, I recall, felt left out and began to skip the lectures. Later on, as a teacher myself, of playwriting and text analysis (and, *a la Eric*), I felt free, in my classes, often to riff on any expanding new thoughts I was having at the moment. I don't recall my classes objecting.

. . . Eric, always anti-establishment and then writing reviews in small but influential intellectual magazines, was controversial in his day (Williams and Miller, I believe, threatened to sue Bentley because of his negative reviews of their Broadway productions).

. . .Eric reaches his 100th year in Sept of this year. I wonder if he's still sending out post cards, written in lower case type, and on which he always pushed his own plays?

. . .Lots, lots more to say about Mr. Bentley. I feel an in-depth Eric Bentley essay coming on. For my Web site. I'll let you know. FG

