

FACEBOOK TRIBUTES

J RANELLI

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I heard the sad news last night that J Ranelli had recently died. On Thanksgiving night. J (just the letter "J") was a director, educator, backer of new works in theatre and mentor of actors, writers and theatre administrators — and played a great part in my professional life. I met J during the forming years of The Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. I believe J was somehow involved with the formation of the O'Neill's prestigious NTI — National Theatre Institute,

In the 70's, when I was running the E. P. Conkle Workshop for New Plays at the University of Texas in Austin, J called me and said he was now head of the Theatre Department at the University of Rhode Island and had assembled a core of professional actors to join the students in a Rep season of 10 plays. He offered me a play slot in the season. I said I was working with composer Claibe Richardson on a new musical, "*Congo Square*," and J said, "Let's do it." Sight unseen! "*Congo Square*" was produced in Rep at URI with William Finn's then new musical, "*Scrambled Eggs*."

J directed two seasons for the Conkle. In one of them, he workshopped a late-evening bare bones production of a musical Raymond Benson and I were working on: "*The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer*." J then produced a full production of Cramer at URI — which had a memorable rehearsal period because, among other things, I survived a stairway collapsing under me in the house Raymond and I were staying in. J was to do two other productions of Cramer in New York City.

On Broadway, J directed "*Herzl*" [1976] and "*Einstein and the Polar Bear*" [1981]. For TV, he did a "*Law And Order*." In Pittsburgh, J directed a production of Brecht's, "*Galileo*" and, at Carnegie

Mellon, "Sweeny Todd." And he taught theatre courses and innovative workshops everywhere—here and abroad.

The last time I think I saw J was at a New Dramatists fund-raiser luncheon. I believe it was the luncheon day when the New Dramatists finally owned outright the ND building and, back at the W. 44th Street headquarters, they literally burned the mortgage paper. J, who had just been appointed the Artistic Director of that summer's O'Neill Theatre Center, was there and said a few words. Then J began to shuttle back and forth from east to west coast and to coach leading actors in their films, here and abroad. So we'd chat on the phone. But that, alas, happened less and less. Until it just stopped. About three years ago. Now I'm unlikely to know the answer to the ultimate J mystery: ". . .why your name is just the letter 'J' — and with not even a period after it!" He'd always laugh about my exasperation. Because I really wasn't exasperated; who really cares! . . .Cared.

**My main J take away— besides the prodigious talent — was that it was always about the work. J's gone; that work ethic stays. RIP, J.
Photos, 1975-76:**

(1) J smoking, Raymond Benson (center, composer), Jeffrey Kindley (Conkle playwright, "Hugo Martyr")

(2) J with two of his sons.

