

# Remembering Jim Davis

JANELLE REINELT, PATRICIA SMYTH AND TIM WHITE

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It is a sad assignment but also a privilege to write about one of the most delightful, intelligent and kind colleagues I have known in my academic life. More than boss and colleague, Jim Davis was friend and family. In my mind's eye, I will always see him in his kitchen, setting out scrumptious dishes he had prepared for his friends with a glass of pinot grigio in one hand and a paring knife in the other. He was like an avuncular uncle or a benign *padrone* – head of a diverse *familia*, not based on blood alone. He was the host of the party and also the head of the family (Fig. 1).

Jim Davis hired me to come to Warwick from the University of California, Irvine in 2006. I had known him previously as the person who had almost single-handedly organized an excellent international conference in Sydney in 2001 for the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). At the time, I was on the Executive Committee of the IFTR, and was trying to troubleshoot various conference-planning issues for the federation. Davis proved excellent at all aspects of conference problem solving: international diplomacy, programme design, financial management, local arrangements, improvising. I had been impressed with his straightforward way of tackling the issues, and also his modest, almost shy, mode of communication. He was a person you could rely on and trust. I saw that, and it is probably the main reason I agreed to relocate to Warwick.

Davis came to Warwick at a time when it needed to rebuild after becoming a rather dysfunctional department, even though it had some strong senior names associated with it. When Davis took over, he was both ambitious to build a 'world-class' department and at the same time determined that fairness and equality would prevail during his reign, and that senior staff would support instead of take advantage of more junior staff. He hired an extraordinary group of talented and multifaceted international people within a couple of years, parlaying positions into multiples (on the back of my appointment he managed to get permission to hire Baz Kershaw, who had been on my search committee as the external, and who said as he was leaving the interview that he would like to come to Warwick too). Davis went to our Vice-Chancellor, Nigel Thrift, and convinced him that this was a windfall opportunity and that Warwick should do it. He hired junior colleagues from South Africa and the former Yugoslavia, and later from Australia, and another American. By the end of my second year at Warwick, Davis had created a truly international, extremely talented cohort of younger people, and had himself, Kershaw and me in place as senior staff. One thing I especially respected was that Davis hired most of us knowing that we were focused on contemporary performance while he was a theatre historian of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But because he was eclectic theoretically, kept up with all new developments in the field and went to the theatre a lot – especially new plays – he was



*FIG. 1* Dinner at colleague Shirin Rai's home 2019. Jim and Janelle at the head of the table; on the left, Silvija Jestrovic between her mother and daughter; on the right, Tim White and Dragan Todorovic. Photograph by Milija Gluhovic, the current Head of Theatre and Performance Studies at Warwick University.

totally at home with the idea that he could work side by side with colleagues whose specialties were different from his, and that we could nevertheless form a coherent research strategy and programme. He was fundamentally committed to a principle I also valued deeply: that we must internationalize our approach and our curriculum, and that in order to do that we had to have some figures who were from different nations/cultures on board.

Davis knew when something was important, and when it was good for the school. If he believed in it, he would go out on an administrative limb (either financially or in terms of advocacy within the circles of senior leadership at Warwick). When I applied for an Erasmus Mundus master's degree programme, Davis as head of department supported it fully. The application was extremely complicated, involving a shared curriculum with a minimum of three international partners, double degrees, a calendar of sixteen months and many other features that did not really fit our university formulas. Davis convinced

sceptical senior administration figures that this programme would be good for Warwick, and after I received the European Union five-year grant he smoothed the way to make it happen, making sure that the fledgling course had the resources it needed in the first start-up phases.

This is not the only time I witnessed Davis building department strengths and supporting colleagues in their particular interests. There were so many ways this manifested. In the first few years I was at Warwick, he personally made sure we had visitors, often international, giving research seminars almost every week. There was always wine and refreshments and people lingered. He would take everyone out for dinner afterwards who wanted to come, and sometimes paid from his own pocket when someone like a junior colleague or a research student wanted to come along. He fostered a climate of deep collaboration within the department based on the excitement of our intellectual interests and mutual respect, and also his personal leadership style. When new money became available for partnerships with Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in India, and my colleague Bishnupriya Dutt asked us if we would be interested in a collaboration, Jim immediately agreed to come with me to Delhi to meet the JNU administration in their School of the Arts to see if it was a viable goal. He was involved in the first two years of the collaboration, including contributing to a joint article we published about our research in *Theatre Research International*. He crossed disciplinary specialties in this work as most of the fourteen contributors (seven at each institution) were working on modern or contemporary work while Davis looked at touring companies from the UK that travelled through Australia to India in the nineteenth century. What I prized in all this was that Davis was building a research culture for Warwick in which everyone had their individual focus and yet felt connected to everyone else. That was well over ten years ago and some of us are still working with JNU colleagues to this day. Importantly, mine were not the only projects Davis supported, however: I think Jim supported all our endeavours, and understood all of our work. He read our publications carefully and attended all our practice-as-research events. He organized faculty retreats, including a famous one to the Warwick venue in Venice, for which the cost was roundly criticized, but he thought his staff deserved it! He supported students, too, and was proud of their achievements. Davis enjoyed teaching at all levels on many topics, and was very committed to his research students' growth and development, painstakingly reading their dissertation chapters to provide intelligent feedback on their concepts and close editing of their prose.

I have written primarily about Davis's academic leadership, but in addition to his administrative record, his scholarship is widely respected throughout the field. He worked across two centuries, looking especially at popular entertainments, acting, audiences and touring across the Anglo-Australian divide. He wrote engaging, informative prose, and his work has been recognized for its excellence from his prize-winning book *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880*, to *Georgian and Regency Comic Acting and Its Visual Representation*, which showcases his expertise in visual cultures, bringing together his passion for portraiture, caricatures and print materials (he was an avid collector) and his research on comedy

and actors in these eras. He also maintained research collaborations with Australian colleagues long after leaving the University of New South Wales. Leverhulme, the Australian Humanities Research Council and the Australian Research Council, among other funders, supported his scholarship. He convened historiography working groups and panels for several organizations, including the IFTR, for which he undertook to organize a second highly successful World Congress at Warwick in 2014. He also played many editorial roles, including editing the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*.

When I retired from Warwick, I realized that it was the best department I had been a part of during my time in the academy: not best in the sense of excellence, although it was excellent, but best in achieving a collective identity and sense of community that seldom appears in the individualistic, competitive circles of the academic workplace. For me, that was the most important thing of all, and it was largely down to Jim. The last time I saw him was about a year ago, March 2023, on a rare trip back to the UK from California. He had recovered pretty well from a stroke in 2022 and was able to come out to a restaurant to be with me and some of my colleagues from those early Warwick years: Silviya Jestrovic and her daughter Ana, Milija Gluhovic and Tim White. We laughed and reminisced, with Jim looking forward to giving his first academic paper after his illness, eager to get back to it. I can see him still, sitting at one end of the table, with a glass of wine in one hand and a table knife in the other, joining us in mingling academic and culinary pleasures, just as we did in the ‘old days’.

*Janelle Reinelt*

I was Jim’s friend and research partner for twelve and a half years, having first joined forces with him in the summer of 2011, when we co-edited a special issue of the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*. I am an art historian, so this was a cross-disciplinary collaboration, and the theme of the special issue was the connections between theatre and art in the nineteenth century. I knew Jim already from the conference circuit, and was friendly with him, but this was when our friendship and our academic collaboration really started. We met at the Ikon Gallery café in Birmingham to discuss the special issue, as well as a symposium on our theme, which we decided to call ‘Shared Visions’. The arrangement had been to discuss our plans over lunch, but as we talked the hours slipped by. At some point we moved to a table outside. The light faded, but by eight or nine o’clock that evening there we still were. What we had both expected to be a rather dry academic meeting had turned into a day-long conversation.

What did we talk about that afternoon and into the evening? We got through a few glasses of white wine that day (always Jim’s favourite tippie), so many of the details are unfortunately lost to history. Jim liked to tell anecdotes, so I imagine I heard some of those for the first time that day. A lot of those stories were about things that happened in the 1970s when Jim was a student at Oxford, such as the time he played the artist Rossetti in a university drama about the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, or about the time a little later on when he was just starting out as a university lecturer. In a general sense what came out of those stories was that Jim hadn’t had an easy

time at the start of his career. He'd lacked confidence, and had struggled to find his place in the world. This was surprising to me, since I only ever knew him as a highly respected professor, but the experience of that early struggle meant that he maintained an unusual ability to empathize with younger colleagues and see things from their point of view.

Jim's sociability, his interest in talking to and connecting with people, was one of his most notable, most admirable and most loveable personal qualities. Sociability lay at the heart of his character, but it also stands out as a central theme in his work. We were, both of us, interested in revealing the connections between things one might normally think of as separate and distinct, such as theatre and visual art, or indeed art and life. Jim was fascinated by the friendship networks that linked actors and artists in the nineteenth century. He wanted to understand how personal affections and allegiances determined what actors did onstage or the kinds of picture that artists produced. In life, too, Jim liked to get past superficial divides. He paid little attention to academic hierarchies. He used to joke about a particular type of subtly coded exchange between high-profile academics encountering one other at conferences, which he referred to as the are-you-more important-than-me-or-am-I-more-important-than-you? conversation. Of course, Jim was not above such games, but that level of interaction was never the real point for him; he always wanted to get past it, and, although I was the junior partner, our relationship always felt like a conversation between two people who were learning from each other.

Jim was interested in making connections but he was also concerned with recognizing and respecting difference. The title of his keynote presented at the Theatre and Performance Research Association annual conference in 2018 was 'Theatre, Performance and the Dustbin of History'. He was very concerned in that talk with the way that history has been increasingly disregarded within the humanities, the past only deemed worthy of our attention and engagement in so far as it can be made 'relevant' to our own time. Jim was concerned with the big questions and he never stopped asking them. I think that he himself did not feel that he had finished his work. He was still getting better, still pushing himself.

Jim and I had a weekly video call, a custom we began during the pandemic and then continued, but one of the last times I was actually with him in person was in Ibiza in June 2023 for our friend Pat Roach's birthday celebration. He was recovering from the stroke he had suffered the previous October at that point, but he wanted to walk along the shore and look at the sea, which he loved. We stopped for coffee at a beachside café and chatted about this and that, making plans. After a while, Jim said, 'It's almost like old times.' I said, 'It will be like old times, you'll see.' Eight hours is a long time for a lunch, but nearly thirteen years later, I feel like the conversation we were having was nowhere near finished. It feels like we were right in the middle of something, like it was only just getting to the really interesting bit.

*Patricia Smyth*

'Ah, there's Tim.' Those words, accompanied by a warm smile of recognition, served as a tractor beam that pulled me through crowded bars on many continents, running the gauntlet of assembled historiographers to sit with Jim amidst whatever

makeshift court he had gathered around him. He turned a meeting into a warm embrace – not an actual embrace, mind, the thought of which provoked a most distinctive wrinkle of his face which suggested we will talk no more of this. But backtracking, I first encountered Jim fresh from the land where women glow and men plunder, applying to lead the department at Warwick. Assured yet soft-spoken, he coasted through the interview, though from the moment of appointment he dedicated himself to the task with a startling degree of energy, diplomacy and care that could not help but motivate and inspire all of us who worked with him. Every hour that Jim was awake seemed committed to burnishing the name of the department and empowering those who toiled within, and when he wasn't awake – during several conferences you'd pray he wouldn't start snoring but then he'd come round and ask the most erudite of questions – when he wasn't awake you couldn't help but think that he was dreaming of pushing all of us forward. Jim brought the brilliance of the theatre studies community to us, notably in the form of the wonderful Janelle Reinelt and the unimprovable Baz Kershaw, and then took us out into the world, not only blagging an extravagant staff and partners trip to Venice for an away-day that still has the university puzzled as to how it got signed off, to whole parties of Theatre Studies staff and postgrads forming the most sizeable contingent at IFTR conferences across the globe. We did pitch up at some enviable destinations but the truth is that those of us fortunate to work alongside Jim would have followed him anywhere. As a colleague he was the person you aspired to be; as a friend he was someone you wanted to be with. At the conclusion of a most extravagant spread, the culmination of his week-long seventieth birthday party, Jim, dressed as the very reincarnation of the Sun King, Louis XIV, was to be found somewhat indelicately occupying a gilded chair, very much in his cups. And yet, even as he looked up and saw me, it wasn't with an expected groan but, rather haltingly, to ask if I'd had enough to eat. My caring, adored friend, Jim.

*Tim White*

JANELLE REINELT ([j.reinelt@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:j.reinelt@warwick.ac.uk)) is Professor Emerita at the University of Warwick and the University of California. She has published widely on politics and performance, receiving the Distinguished Scholar Award for lifetime achievement from the American Society for Theatre Research (2010), and an honorary doctorate from the University of Helsinki in 2014. She was President of the International Federation for Theatre Research (2004–7).

PATRICIA SMYTH ([p.m.smyth@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:p.m.smyth@warwick.ac.uk)) is an art historian and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. Her research interests are in nineteenth-century art, theatre and spectatorship. She has published in the *Oxford Art Journal*, the *New Theatre Quarterly*, the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and the *European Journal of English Studies*. Her book, *Paul Delaroche: Painting and Popular Spectacle*, was published by Liverpool University Press in 2022. She was the Ampersand Foundation/Association for Art History Art Historian in Residence, 2022–3 and is co-editor of the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*.

TIM WHITE ([t.white@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:t.white@warwick.ac.uk)) is a Reader in Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Warwick. His teaching and research interests include food and performance, immersive practices, online performance, video and performance in public spaces. He has published articles and chapters on dance, food, music and performing in public places.