

Retirement from the Skidmore College Faculty

Fall 2019



Faculty Meeting
December the Sixth
Two Thousand and Nineteen

Be It Resolved:

The faculty of Skidmore College expresses its profound appreciation and admiration for the following member of the Skidmore faculty who have this year expressed their determination to retire. The faculty further resolves that the following biographical highlights be included in the minutes of the faculty meeting of December 6, 2019 in recognition and celebration of his distinguished service and achievement.



Scholar, essayist, public intellectual, publisher, teacher, mentor, friend, Gautam Dasgupta is taking his final bow from Skidmore at the end of the fall semester. Gautam came to the College in 1990 as a Professor of Theater after having already distinguished himself on the international stage as the winner of the Le Comte du Nouy Foundation Award for “Achievement in Theater,” an Obie Award for “Outstanding Achievement in the Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway Theater,” and the Stanislaw I. Witkiewicz Award for support of Polish culture. What many of his colleagues may not know, however, is that Gautam came late to the arts. Trained initially as a scientist with a B.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering from Jadavpur University in Calcutta, India, Gautam quickly abandoned engineering for theater, making the bold choice to pursue graduate study in the arts and humanities at the University of Connecticut, where he received an MFA in Theater in 1971 and an MA in English in 1972.

After completing the coursework for the Ph.D. at Columbia, Gautam again made a sharp turn in his life by withdrawing from the university to begin his professional career as a writer while founding *Performance Arts Journal* and PAJ publications. A prolific writer, interviewer, and scholar, Gautam has published six books, written over 60 essays, and given countless lectures or talks on topics that range from the American avant-garde to theater and science to technological transformations of culture to modernist poetics. He has cast a critical eye on the work of a wide array of authors, and artists, including Peter Brooks, Reza Abdoh, Heiner Müller, Lee Breur, Mabou Mines, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Marguerite Duras, Susan Sontag, and Spaulding Gray.

His work has a global reach and has enjoyed international acclaim. An inaugural Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, a think tank founded by Richard C. Holbrooke and Henry Kissinger among others, Gautam dedicated academic year 1998 – 1999 to a project entitled “The Bicameral Dramaturgy of Heiner Müller,” one of the most important artistic voices coming out of the former German Democratic Republic, whose postmodern and what the critic Hans-Theis Lehmann has called “post-dramatic” theater continues to influence contemporary writers and theater-makers today. Gautam has served as a member and later Chair of the New York State Council on the Arts and as a guest judge for the Obie Awards

Committee. Currently he has the privilege of nominating writers for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and is a Peer Reviewer for candidates for the Berlin Prize Fellowship at the American Academy of Berlin. With his vast understanding of the theater world, his appreciation of theater-making in all of its guises and in all of its cultural contexts, and his unflagging dedication to the principle that theater should always question the governing assumptions of the times, Gautam has led a simple but compelling life of pure dedication to art.

Here at Skidmore, Gautam has been a legendary figure, teaching courses in Theater and Culture, American Theater, Beckett and Kafka, The Dawn of Modernism, The American Western, Screwball Comedy, and, of course, Funky Plays. He served as Chair of the Theater Department from 1994 to 2001 and Director of the Asian Studies Program from 2011 to 2013. In 2009 he was chosen by the senior class to deliver the commencement address entitled “Consumptive Knowledge: The Ravishments of a Liberal Arts Education,” a title that would come as no surprise to his students, who call him a “living genius” whose classes are filled with “terrific discussion fueled by a brilliant professor.” Whether in the classroom or on the stage, Gautam works with his students and for his students by exhorting them to, as he notes in an essay entitled “Teaching Students to Be Artists,” “comprehend how true artists in the theater always move beyond their discipline, immersing themselves not only in the other arts but in the sciences as well, to enhance their understanding of humanity, even if it entails betraying existing models of theatology.” His students are surely right when they note that “Gautam makes [them] realize just how interconnected everything really is.” And they are better artists for it.

Despite all his accomplishments and all of the accolades that have come his way, however, I am sure that Gautam would agree that his singular personal achievement came early in life, when he won the All-India Debating Competition from 1967 to 1969. The skills he learned at that tender age clearly influenced him profoundly, for Gautam is by training and temperament a debater, who has spent his career in the intellectual arena wrangling with essential questions about the nature of theater, about the role theater must play in the affairs of the world, and about what he has called “the adversarial value of art.” It is Gautam’s profound belief that it is debate that carries us forward both as artists and—more importantly—as human

beings, a lesson that represents his lasting legacy to his students, his friends, and his colleagues. As Gautam and his beloved Lulu set off for warmer climes, they leave us to carry on the tradition, for the debate now goes on in us, Gautam's most profound works of art.