On losing Jane Taylor

The Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) at UWC is deeply saddened by the passing of our friend and colleague, Emerita Professor Jane Taylor on the 6th of September. Together with friends, colleagues and students from across South Africa and beyond, we mourn Jane’s passing and seek to celebrate her extraordinary contribution to the academy in South Africa and beyond.

Jane’s prolific career speaks for itself — her numerous books, some single authored, others collaborative; her plays, her playscripts and librettos; her novels, journal articles and chapters; her exhibitions, exhibition catalogues and art books; her collaborations for theatre, her edited volumes and her numerous keynote lectures – many of them works of art in and of themselves, such as her award winning performance, “PAN: A Performance Lecture” published in *Critical Times* in 2019. Her accomplishments have been recognised through numerous awards, including the Olive Schreiner Award for New Fiction, a Rockefeller Fellowship at Emory University, Atlanta, and residential fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study in Paris, the University of California at Berkeley, Northwestern University in Illinois, the University of Chicago in Chicago, Cambridge University and Oxford University in Britain, and the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies, as well as through her role as advisor for a number of international cultural and arts festivals, such as dOCUMENTA 12. As holder of the A.W. Mellon Chair in Aesthetic Theory and Material Performance at the CHR and convenor of the CHR’s Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO), Jane’s role as mentor and supervisor of generations of postgraduate students and artists has been emphasised by her students, past and present. Many of these relations of mentorship developed into deep personal and intellectual friendships as well as continued artistic collaborations. Indeed, Jane’s generosity of spirit was matched only by her larger-than-life presence and intellectual charisma.

While Jane’s academic career took her to various universities in Europe and North America, it was to UWC where she returned time and again. From her appointment as a junior lecturer in the Department of English in 1985 to her retirement from the CHR in 2021, Jane remained committed to pursuing her intellectual inquiries, artistic endeavours and pedagogical commitments at UWC. She worked at the university when Professor Richard van der Ross was Vice Chancellor and when Professor Jakes Gerwel assumed that role, a period of “massive experiment, renewal,” and “remarkable pedagogical innovation”, as Jane described it. As anyone who took one of her classes will recall—and there are senior academics at UWC among her former students—Jane was a captivating, experimental, and brilliant teacher who supported students and challenged colleagues to think beyond the limits of their ambition and to question certainties and assumptions about what it might mean to be human.

In 2016, on the invitation of Professor Premesh Lalu, then director of the CHR, Jane gave up her position at Leeds University where she held the Wole Soyinka Chair in Theatre to return once again to UWC so as to take up the CHR’s  [Andrew W Mellon Chair of Aesthetic Theory and Material Performance](https://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/research-platforms/andrew-w-mellon-chair-aesthetic-theory-material-performance/) and convene the Centre’s Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO). During this time, Jane worked alongside the Ukwanda Puppetry Collective’s Siphokazi Mpofu, Sipho Ngxola and Luyanda Nogodlwana, as well as the late Ncedile Daki, as puppetry and performance mentors for the annual Barrydale Puppet Parade, an annual undertaking of the longstanding partnership between the CHR and Net vir Pret in Barrydale and the now defunct Handspring Puppet Trust (of which she was a founding member, together with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of the Handspring Puppet Company, as well as Premesh Lalu). Through these generous and important long-standing relationships, Ukwanda Puppetry Collective is now based at the LoKO workshop at the CHR, UWC’s new facility in Woodstock.

Looking back over her 45 year career in academia and the arts, Jane’s legacy interweaves ambitious, avant garde and experimental artistic collaborations with robust and wide reaching theoretical excavations which drew inspiration from the complex political and social milieu of South Africa. Jane wrote widely on contemporary South African cultural politics, and in 1987 she co-edited with David Bunn the landmark, and now canonic special issue of *TriQuarterly* of new and known poetry, essays, short stories, translations, visual art and photography titled, *From South Africa* (University of Chicago Press) which documents the “Emergency Years” of the final decade of the apartheid regime. The landmark issue sought to intervene in the cultural politics and debates on the arts in the liberation struggle to present a “version of South Africa — an active statement and a series of pointed productions rather than a mirror image of life under apartheid.” (1987, 29) In 1994, she and David Bunn curated the exhibition "Displacements" at the Block Gallery, Northwestern University, inviting figures such as Njabulo Ndebele, Mandla Langa, Ingrid de Kok, Ari Sitas, Daniel and Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Santu Mofokeng and Alf Qabula to the conference that accompanied the exhibition. Once back at UWC in the heady atmosphere of possibility of the nineties, Jane and colleagues hosted several significant figures, such as Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, Anthony Appiah and Gayatri Spivak, in an atmosphere of political exhilaration and intellectual energy. Of Jane’s significant *oeuvre*, it is important to mention the "Fault Lines" exhibition that she curated in 1996 at the Cape Town Castle alongside a series of cultural and artistic responses to truth and reconciliation. The same year saw Jane’s award winning play text on Alfred Jarry's [Pere Ubu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pere_Ubu), staged as a puppetry and mixed media theatre production*, [Ubu and the Truth Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubu_and_the_Truth_Commission)* with artist/director [William Kentridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kentridge) and the [Handspring Puppet Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handspring_Puppet_Company)’s Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler. The award-winning work has been performed across South Africa, and internationally, recently being restaged at the Edinburgh Festival among other spaces.

In early 2022, while on a residential fellowship at the Eikones Centre for the Theory and History of the Image, at the University of Basel in Switzerland, Jane suffered a pulmonary embolism as well as a stroke. Since returning to South Africa after her time in a rehabilitation clinic in Basel, Jane began the long process of rehabilitation and recovery, an immensely difficult process that she faced with such grace and courage. Just this past August, to the joy of Jane’s colleagues, friends and students, she joined us at the CHR’s annual Winter School. For many of us, Winter School was the last time that we would see Jane before she passed away at home on 6 September. We wish Jane’s family, friends, students and colleagues deep condolences on losing her.

A tribute in memory of Emerita Professor Jane Taylor will be held at the CHR’s Greatmore Humanities Hub on 13 October at 16:00. Kindly RSVP your attendance to mfelix@uwc.ac.za.