On Monday evening I learned that my long time friend, David Lukas (Dave) had died suddenly. During the spring of 1975 I met Dave as a result of joining a small theater, which at that time was located in Northridge, CA. It was what is or was known as a 99 seat waiver house (named Megaw Theater, after the founders). None of us was paid and it was a showcase for aspiring young actors.

I had just graduated from high school and Dave had recovered from an accident that occurred working as a scenery carpenter at one of the local studios (sorry I cannot remember which one). Dave was never going to work in the studios again he had told me. So he made his income, at the time, investing in the stock market.

During that spring of '75 Dave was designing and building sets for Megaw Theater. He did not plan to reenter his past studio career but was building scenery because he had a passion for the art and craft of scenery design and construction. Remarkable since during that summer his foot and ankles still would not fully support his weight so he was using a cane constantly. Anyways as a 17 year old kid, I recall being immediately fascinated by the scenery and lighting tricks of this little theater. Dave began to teach me the finer points of scenery construction and we worked daily side by side for the next year and a half - not just on that summer’s, 1975 production of Kiss Me Kate but constructing a half dozen different transformations of that ridiculously tiny stage in Northridge CA. I vividly recall we built a bright castle set for Kiss Me Kate with an amazing little turn tables that Dave showed me how to meticulously build and make rotate all to smoothly and especially silently. It had to be silent since during the set reconfiguration a very small live orchestra would be playing and we did not want the scene change to disturb the music. Dave showed me how to build flats (e.g. walls of the set), which nails to use for what and what tools to use. I recall Dave that summer constantly hanging his cane on the set pounding a nail then crabbing the cane and moving on to the next spot. We covered the entire Kiss Me Kate set with sheets of thick white Styrofoam – I remember wondering why. Dave, during that time, carefully worked with a scenery artist, who painted the Styrofoam with a light gray gradient and etched it to look like stone bricks. On that tiny stage the castle could transition from an interior to an exterior in seconds and silently – to me it remains amazing to this day.

A small production called *“*Come Back, Little Sheba” at Megaw theatre was built up in 1975. Dave was asked to design the set with James Riddle. This was another production that I helped Dave build but this time Dave was unhappy with the result because he felt there was lack of attention to detail in the final decoration and it lacked the perfection he was use to. To this day it is ironic to me that in 1975 the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle presented Dave Lukas and James Riddle a best set design award for this production. I think they were not just presenting this award to Dave for this production but rather for a series of stage scenery projects that Dave designed and built.

Anyways we continued on to build together during 1976 for various productions, of which I have to admit, I do not recall many particulars. We built interiors of homes, a prison and a dingy looking 11th. century Caste for the production of Lion in Winter. Again for Lion in Winter, Styrofoam was used but this time Dave had them paint it to look exactly like dirty old stone. We spent long days working on sets for zero money back then. Dave taught me a work ethic that has lasted through out my life and perhaps is the reason I made it through school.

As 1976 progressed my junior college course load began to increase so I had less time for the Theatre. Around this time I recall Dave showing up one day, after knowing him for a couple years, and pointing out that he no longer was using the cane. I thought to myself how did this guy get rid of it? Dave and I continued to participate with the little theatre in 1977 and part of 1978 in a limited way. I moved up north to college, but Dave was still involved and always paid attention to detail, quality and yes he was quite innovative when building sets with a budget that was very close to zero.

To this day I still do not understand what drove Dave to do all this work. But years later I would realize the lasting effect it would have on me. Dave taught me back then what it was to be passionate about your work. That good work was not just about money, or glory, or prestige but because it was your thing and you took pride in it. He taught me what it was to be innovative when you have little resources available. Something that I repeatedly experienced during my professional life and because of Dave could handle it.

Dave taught me what persistence was and demonstrated it to me years later in the 1980’s and 90’s working day and night in a little store on Ventura Blvd in Studio City, CA. selling Laser Disc’s before any of us even knew what a video disc was. He built Dave’s Video store up from the ground; not as fast as the scenery at Megaw Theatre, but with just as much attention to detail, quality of service and product as I had observed in the 1970’s. And indeed he did all of this not just for the money, or prestige but because it was his thing, his idea and Dave’s creation.

Over the past thirty six years since I have known Dave he was always there with gentle advice and wisdom for me. Although after the early 80’s we only spoke once or twice a year we continued to stay in touch. Every once and awhile we would meet with Dave and Linda for dinner or to visit. He was the best man at my wedding, a good friend, my first mentor and will be missed.

Although Dave is gone now, his effect on my life will always remain and be part of me.

Len (Lenny) Reder

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