



CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY Faculty Senate

Louis Barbato was born on April 3, 1937 in Jersey City, New Jersey on, as he wrote, “the wrong side of the Hudson River,” but he was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to attend Regis High School in Manhattan, so he spent much of his teenage years on “the right side of the river.” The opportunity to attend plays by such masters of modern drama as Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, and William Inge ignited Louis’ passion for drama; a part time evening job at the Metropolitan Opera led to an enduring love of opera as well.

After graduating from high school, Louis enrolled at St. Peter’s college, where he received his B.A. in 1959. He then accepted a teaching assistantship at Purdue University, which awarded him an M.S. in English in 1961; Louis received an M.S. because the Indiana legislature had not yet authorized Purdue to offer the M.A. degree. Although it took him from New York, Louis considered his decision to pursue his first graduate degree at Purdue a fortuitous one because while teaching first year composition there he discovered his talent for teaching.

After receiving his degree from Purdue, Louis spent two years as an instructor at the University of Delaware. There he met Irving Ribner, whose nurturing Louis credited with firing his enthusiasm for Shakespeare and for helping develop his skills as a scholar and teacher of Shakespeare. Louis next became a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, finishing his course work in 1968 and receiving his Ph.D. in 1971.

In 1968 Louis joined the faculty of the University of Cincinnati, teaching Shakespeare along with Charles MacDonald and Bill Godshalk. Cleveland State hired Louis to develop its courses in Renaissance drama, especially in Shakespeare, in 1970. Louis spent the rest of his academic career at CSU, teaching Shakespeare regularly, but also developing courses in modern drama for the English department, and in theater history, criticism, and appreciation for the dramatic arts program. After the English department began expanding its creative writing offerings, Louis even taught a course in playwriting, though, as far as I know, he never aspired to be a playwright himself.

At Cleveland State, Louis remained active as a scholar, writing articles and reviews on Renaissance topics, attending and delivering papers at professional conferences, and keeping abreast of critical developments in both Renaissance and twenty century drama. He also became a popular lecturer and panelist on local productions of drama and opera. He even used his writing and organizing skills to serve as principal writer for an NCAA recertification Self Study, an onerous but necessary task.

Much of Louis’ energy at CSU went into teaching and service. Louis was widely acknowledged as a master teacher. He was not the type of teacher who tried to turn his students into acolytes.

Much of Louis’ energy at CSU went into teaching and service. Louis was widely acknowledged as a master teacher. He was not the type of teacher who tried to turn his students into acolytes. Rather, he sought to develop his students’ own understanding and abilities.

Rather, he sought to develop his students' own understanding and abilities. His skillful questioning enabled students, many of whom had little experience with live theater, to analyze the plays they read with insight and depth. To contextualize his students' reading, to enable them to experience plays as dramatic productions not just written texts, Louis arranged for them to attend local dramatic productions when possible and brought in films of plays when nothing live was available. Louis was a demanding teacher who expected a lot from his students and who helped them achieve the highest level of work of which they were capable. His reputation as a teacher drew students to his classes no matter the subject.

Louis considered service to the university as second only to teaching in its value to Cleveland State, so his service and administrative duties frequently pulled him from the classroom. The list of committees and task forces in which he participated is too extensive to review here. I will say that in every committee on which I served with Louis he was efficient and effective. His extensive knowledge of the university and good judgment were essential to our work. I do want to mention Louis' contributions in his three major service roles at CSU: two terms as University Ombudsman, several years as Executive Assistant and Senior Advisor to the University President, and his final three years at CSU as Chair of the English Department.

Louis served as an academic mentor to both students and faculty. When faced with problems with classes or bureaucracy, people naturally turned to Louis for help because of their confidence in his integrity, fairness, and effectiveness. This led to Louis' first major administrative task—serving two terms as university Ombudsman. Louis was effective in that role because he realized that his function was not to take sides but to solve problems. As he said, his client was the situation. Because faculty and staff trusted Louis and the administration respected him, he succeeded in that very difficult role.

Louis also spent more than ten years in an even more challenging role, as Special Assistant and Senior Advisor to the President of the University. He took on that role at a difficult time at CSU. The AAUP had recently started a campaign to unionize the faculty, an effort the new administration and the Board of Trustees opposed. Fiercely loyal to his boss but sympathetic to faculty grievances, Louis made every effort to make certain that each side understood the other's perspective, and he worked tirelessly during the campaign and the contract negotiations that followed to make certain that the inevitable strains of that fraught process did not lead to enduring hostility.

As his last significant role at CSU, Louis agreed to become the Chair of the English Department, a decision his colleagues welcomed enthusiastically. He became Chair of a department that was less than half the size of the one he had joined, and he immediately began work to rebuild that department, not to recreate the department he had joined more than thirty years earlier, but to fashion a new department for a new era. In his three years as Chair Louis made a start on that challenging goal, and his successors as Chair have continued his efforts.

After a lengthy illness Louis Barbato died at home, as he wished, in the early morning on December 10, 2020. His longtime friend and companion, Tom Collins, was with him at the end. His cremated remains have been interred in the Barbato family cemetery plot that overlooks the

Manhattan that Louis loved. He will be sorely missed by his former students, his colleagues, and his friends. For me Louis was first a mentor, then a trusted colleague, and finally a dear friend. His death leaves a gap that nothing will fill.

✂ Written by Professor Emeritus Dr. David Larson and
delivered to Faculty Senate on February 5, 2020