

Alan C. Dessen, 1935-2026



Alan C. Dessen was born in Baltimore, MD on November 16, 1935. His parents, Maurice Dessen and Shirley (Kaplan) Dessen, were both from families that had recently immigrated to the US from eastern Europe. Maurice died when Alan was eleven years old, after which Shirley continued to raise him and his older sister Judy while also working as a small business owner, running a women's clothing store.

After high school, Alan received a scholarship to attend Harvard University where, in a departure from the norms in his family, he studied literature and humanities, sparking a lifelong academic career. He completed his PhD in English at Johns Hopkins University in 1963, and in the same year married Cynthia Sheldon, a Hopkins classmate completing her PhD in Classics. Alan's first faculty appointments were at the University of Wisconsin and Northwestern University, and in 1973, now with two small children, he and Cynthia settled in North Carolina where he joined the English Department at UNC Chapel Hill. He taught there for over 30 years, retiring in 2005 as the Peter G. Phialas Professor (Emeritus) of English Literature.

Alan's scholarship spanned more than 40 years of publications and included seven single-authored books, many dozens of articles and reviews, and the influential *Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama 1580-1642*, co-authored with Leslie Thomson. His research focused on what he described as "theater history in the age of Shakespeare, particularly how plays may have been staged then as opposed to now, a pursuit that has involved detailed attention to the surviving stage directions." At the same time, throughout his career, Alan was equally passionate about bringing historical research into dialogue with today's productions, and towards that end, he cultivated collaborations with numerous actors and directors, and took on many projects that integrated research, theatrical practice and teaching.

One of the most important of those was his role from 1994-2001 directing ACTER (A Center for Teaching, Education, and Research), later renamed AFTLS (Actors From The London Stage). The program had been developed by Alan's mentor, UC Santa Barbara Professor Homer "Murph" Swander, and it brings groups of five UK actors to US college campuses for performance-teaching residencies in which each actor plays multiple roles in a Shakespeare play with minimal scenery and costumes, to focus attention on the art of acting and interpretation. Working together with Cynthia, who handled administration and tour logistics, the couple facilitated many residencies and nurtured longstanding relationships with many British actors and US campuses, eventually passing on the program to Notre Dame where it continues today.

Alan also worked extensively with the Shakespeare Globe Centre and the Institute of Renaissance Studies at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, taking great pleasure in engaging audiences with festival productions through his public lectures and classes. He particularly enjoyed co-teaching with actors and directors, including an impactful seminar he co-led with director Audrey Stanley at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Alan's academic peers remember him as a kind, generous mentor who was always committed to nurturing the work of junior Shakespeareans, most notably through his devoted participation in seminars at the Shakespeare Association of America's annual meetings. In a similar spirit, Alan cultivated friendships with a wide-ranging network of actors and directors through avidly attending and writing about contemporary Shakespeare productions, especially in yearly trips to London and Stratford which he sustained over many decades.

Alan's work bridging research, practice and teaching is perhaps best captured in the preface by renowned actor Patrick Stewart for *Staging Shakespeare: Essays in Honor of Alan C. Dessen*, a 2007 *festschrift* edited by Lena Orlin and Miranda Johnson-Haddad. Stewart describes Alan as "an actor's academic, a teacher who combines scholarship and study with a love for live theater and an understanding of the problems that confront an actor performing or preparing to perform a classical text." Praising his ability to "unlock puzzling complexity with clarity and vision," Stewart expresses his debt to Alan for helping him to "go beyond the obvious" in preparing Shylock's famous monologue from *Merchant of Venice*, and writes that for his next performances with Royal Shakespeare Company, he couldn't wait "to welcome Alan into my dressing room for speedy first reactions and then off to the pub for deeper analysis."

Among family, Alan was a quietly supportive figure who took great pride in his children and grandchildren, and was always eager to help them pursue educational and creative opportunities in support of their individual paths. He was also known among his extended family as an amateur guitarist-singer, having cultivated a deep love for American folk music repertoire that emerged during his college and graduate school years in the 1950s and early 1960s. After his retirement, Alan and Cynthia moved to the Carol Woods community in Chapel Hill, where they both enjoyed many years of teaching adult education classes in their areas of scholarly expertise, and where he also founded and ran a folk singing group.

Alan died in Chapel Hill, NC on January 20, 2026 at the age of 90. He was pre-deceased by his sister, Judy Glick, and is survived by his wife Cynthia Dessen, his son Michael Dessen, his daughter Sarah Dessen, and their families including Michael's wife Mariángeles Soto-Díaz and their son Kai Soto-Dessen, and Sarah's husband Jay Marks and their daughter Sasha Marks.