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## Keith Allen Interview

Keith Allen

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## **KEITH ALLEN JOINS THEORA ENGLAND AS “JUNIOR PARTNER” IN NORTHWESTERN’S THEATRE DEPARTMENT**

*The theatre program was in full swing when Keith Allen came to Northwestern in 1967. He didn't know Dr. England at the time, but it didn't take long for him to discover the influence that she had in the theatre department and beyond. He also found that he could relate to her interest in children's theatre, for which he would assume responsibility after England's retirement.*

*Keith Allen was interviewed as to what it was like to work with the highly popular Professor England. The interview took place in 2009, after Allen's retirement from Northwestern.*

**Northwestern:** You came to Northwestern College in 1967 as assistant professor of speech. Prior to that you had taught at Trinidad Junior College in Trinidad, Colorado, and Glenwood Springs High School in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Courses taught included English, speech, and social studies. You also directed plays. What drew you to Northwestern College?

**Keith Allen:** In 1967 we were living in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. We had four children, ages 7, 5, 5, and 3. Glenwood Springs was a town of perhaps 5,000 people, a very outdoorsy community heavily dependent on tourism for its economy. In the summer the tourists came for the beautiful surrounding mountains, temperate climate, and the hot springs baths and block-long hot springs pool. In the winter Glenwood Springs was the gateway to Aspen and its ski culture. Already our seven-year-old daughter was being influenced by the overwhelming ski culture. Her school friends were on the slopes in the winter and in the pool during the summer. Family life seemed not to be a priority, and on a school teacher's salary we could not afford to keep up with the ski culture. Additionally, a new ski area was being built immediately outside of Glenwood. We decided that maybe we did not want to raise our children in the ski culture and that the best thing to do would be to move our children out of that particular location.

What drew me to Northwestern? First, both Marabel and I had attended church-related colleges as undergraduates. We had met at North Park College, Chicago, which is sponsored by the Covenant Church in America. Later I attended Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, a Lutheran school. When Lars Granberg called me to interview for a position in theatre and speech, I accepted. Upon meeting with Dr. Granberg, Dr. England, and the students, the program seemed to be quite strong and certainly well established. Orange City seemed to be a good place to raise children, and a job at the local hospital for Marabel was very feasible.

**NW:** You were hired as assistant professor of speech. What were your actual responsibilities?

**KA:** Actual responsibilities initially were to teach the following courses: Speech I, Introduction to the Theatre, History of the Theatre, and Technical Theatre. In addition, I

had the responsibilities to design the sets and light and act as technical director for three productions per year.

**NW:** The chair of the speech/theatre department at the time was Theora England. What were your first impressions of her?

**KA:** My first impressions of Dr. England were quite positive. The interview process was well organized and carried out with dispatch. She had a pleasant demeanor, but also a most business-like manner. Everything about her portion of the interview was very organized. During the interview she carefully laid out my intended duties. She had arranged a meeting with perhaps 15 to 18 students, all of whom seemed quite dedicated to the department; all who spoke were highly positive. The physical space occupied by the department included a nice costume collection. In all the department seemed to have had excellent leadership, and I was impressed with her abilities.

**NW:** Did working with Dr. England facilitate your growth in drama and theatrical skills? And if so, how?

**KA:** When I arrived I think she was glad to have help with the design and tech work and, therefore, left me pretty much on my own to design and build. She wasn't a hands-on overseer when I first began to work with her. The definite structure from her years of experience provided the framework in which to grow and work. She arranged the class schedules very carefully to avoid conflicts within the department.

We had in place a grant program—students were required to work in the department in exchange for a grant. The student grant program gave the department a predetermined structure. She would plan specific schedules in some detail far in advance. She would set deadlines and expect them to be met. Also, because of the full program, I had to learn very soon how to be organized and efficient. In addition to the three full-length productions, she sponsored a touring group—The Choral Readers—which had both a Christmas and Spring break tour as well as performing a readers' theatre production.

The department had two clubs—Alpha Psi Omega, a club for theatre students, and Quintillians, a club for speech students. Thus, I learned to operate within strict time and work schedules. I am sure that having been the sole person in the department for so many years, strict organization was the only way she could have functioned.

**NW:** You took on the children's theatre after Dr. England left Northwestern. Did you have an interest in, or experience in, children's theatre before coming to Northwestern?

**KA:** Yes. In Glenwood Springs High School we had done some children's plays. I had an advanced speech course in which we did some theatre. When students were sufficiently interested we would perform short scenes for classes in the grade school. That was my original beginning of doing plays for children. The speech students learned so much about audience participation, about audience acceptance of their efforts. The high schoolers knew immediately what was working and what wasn't. The children tell

you immediately if they are uninterested. They fiddle, they move, they poke their next-door neighbor. I decided we needed to do more of this type of theatre. So, when I came to Northwestern and they were doing children's theatre, I said, "Right. It's the right thing to do."

**NW:** The theatre program grew remarkably during the time that Dr. England was at Northwestern. To what do you attribute that?

**KA:** Her personality. She had a single-purpose quality about her. She was determined and driven. If she set her mind to accomplish a task, it was going to be done. Difficulties were opportunities to be grasped. Obstacles were hurdles to be jumped. Odds against success were mathematic formulas to be beaten. In her early days her energy must have been immeasurable. By her late sixties she was not as energetic, but still could work from early morning—some rehearsals began with a 6:30 call—to late at night. Many rehearsals were closed after 11:00 p.m. In addition to running the department and teaching a full load of classes, I understand that, before I came, she had on occasion even produced a community theatre Thanksgiving play in the Town Hall.

**NW:** I understand that Dr. England had a strong personality. What was it like working with her? And is there an example you would like to share?

**KA:** Well, I worked with her. I was a 32-year-old junior partner. She had at least thirty-two years seniority at the college. She was the chair of the department, controlled the budget, was sponsor of both Alpha Psi Omega and Quintillians, and determined the department schedules. I didn't go against her power. If we had a disagreement about a design, as the director she would prevail. As the designer, I understood that in the theatre the director is the prime mover, the captain of the ship, the "supreme court," the final say.

An example might illustrate the relationship. I designed a set for Shakespeare's *Othello*. The set design was a series of levels in a crescent shape. The levels were quite low at each end of the crescent and rose to a greater height in the middle of the stage. Dr. England was fine with the playing area until we came to rehearse Desdemona's balcony scene. She wanted to know, "Where is the window?"

I indicated that because of the nature of the platform stage with its many levels and its various and sundry places to stage fights, reveal tombs, hold confrontations, take walks, etc., that there really wasn't the need for a window—that the high balcony level, on which Desdemona could stand, while Othello stood on the stage below looking up, could establish the same relationship. But there was not a window.

In her mind there was a window, so a window was incorporated into the set. As the director her prerogative was to see a window as a requirement in the set.

**NW:** You have been quoted as saying, "Students respected her and held her in fear and awe." Elaborate on that.

**KA:** That's true. Well, let's go to respect. First, she put a theatrical production together so that all the pieces fit together. The whole production had an integrity. She knew what she wanted the production to be and without equivocation built the different sections to achieve her desired result. Her systematic approach gave the students confidence in the work. Second, she encouraged them to believe in the importance of their work. The students were deeply involved in many different phases of production—acting, publicity, building costumes and sets. They had a good deal of freedom to create within the set boundaries and owned the final product. When one worked with Dr. England, she gave the definite impression that her methods and views were the only right and correct methods and views. I think most students were comforted by her certitude. In the late sixties students seemed willing to accept her authority and respect her leadership position.

Remember that for students in theatre, especially majors and minors, Dr. England held their college career choices in her hands. As the department academic advisor, she determined their class schedules. She decided who received grant monies. She cast all actors in all plays. For those in Choral Readers, she arranged their Thanksgiving break, Spring Break, and weekends when they would conduct church services. Production rehearsals set much of their social calendars. So you get the idea that she required dedication? They were required to put in long hours, sometimes to the detriment of their studies. They would work for her, and work for her, and work for her. As a result they knew the long hours she put in and were in awe (as was I) of her ability to carry on, impressed with all that she did.

I am sure her struggles to build the department were legion. First, budgets were extremely tight. There was never enough money to build costumes, pay royalties, build adequate sets, buy lights (we were using lights from the 1940s in 1967), buy make-up or scripts.

Second, the lack of an adequate facility hindered the program's growth. Students would look at the auditorium/gymnasium and tell us their high school stage was better equipped, and they were right. Third, there were too few theatre majors. The students participating in theatre were majors in history, English, religion, music, art, psychology, and the humanities. First loyalties were severely divided, resulting in undeniable tensions. Yet she carried on, and I think students respected her for her persistence, and because she cared about them.

The students were right to fear her power. If she decided a student wasn't sufficiently dedicated or wasn't working hard, whether as an actor or as a student, or wasn't willing to devote effort to the department, she would remove privileges. Acting roles would disappear, grant dollars would not be increased, special assignments would go elsewhere. If a student would disagree with her policies or not do what she expected, she would bypass that student in favor of another. Most students understood the system and did not stand in her way. And saying that about her method of managing the department, I don't know that she could have run the program by herself all those years in any other way.

**NW:** Did you ever have to stand up to her?

**KA:** I remember a couple of times when perhaps our disagreement produced a change. In 1967 speech was required of all students for graduation. Thus, the department taught multiple sections each semester. For second semester she wanted me to teach an eight o'clock (actually, I think classes began at 7:50), and I said I couldn't. I couldn't teach an eight o'clock because rehearsals lasted until eleven, and after rehearsal we still had to clean the gymnasium for classes the next day. So, when the schedule of classes came out, Walt McCormick had the eight o'clock class.

But, basically, when we had a disagreement, she would do it her way. Perhaps she found my reasons for disagreement unconvincing. Perhaps she saw me as a youth with a lack of wisdom. Perhaps I had revealed poor judgment and she thought I made poor decisions. I often wondered if previous struggles with male colleagues colored our relationship, and being male I could not be a trusted ally. She was reluctant to give over any authority beyond what was necessary. Perhaps her reluctance was due to habit. She had worked alone for so long that sharing authority was alien to her. Whatever the reason, she would make the determination independent of outside input.

Let a single example suffice. When a group of theatre students were to take a production to Chicago and Urbana, Illinois, over Christmas, Dr. England was unable to sponsor the group at the last minute and selected a female student to be in charge of the group. I learned of the selection after the fact from the students involved. As her junior colleague, I would have thought she might have informed me about the selection beforehand and never quite understood why I was left to learn about the selection afterward. At the time I knew why she had selected the particular student, but never learned why she failed to inform me—unless she knew I would disagree with the selection, which I would have. The college would be in an untenable position if something happened to the group without an adult sponsor being present.

**NW:** What do you consider to be Theora England's greatest strengths?

**KA:** Force of personality and detailed organization. Dr. England refused to accept an answer she did not want to hear. She was so determined to succeed that she was willing to do what was necessary to move ahead. After she had planned rehearsals, little could change the schedule. And if change was necessary, she would revise rather than cancel; to cancel would be defeat. Her personality was revealed in her early planning and in her ability to organize.

In addition to the earlier examples, let me give another example of her organization. In the spring, before anybody had thought of it, she would map out the fall and spring schedules in detail for the next year and reserve the classrooms and theatre spaces for production and rehearsal. The college would hire a work-study student for the summer, and together with the student she would work throughout the summer preparing the spring and fall tours for the Choral Readers, preparing for the fall classes, catalogue the

costume collection, printing fall notices, etc. So, she was always ahead of the game. When fall classes arrived, she was prepared.

**NW:** Ahead of the game. When she reserved spaces that she shared with other departments at the college, like the gymnasium/auditorium, did that pose problems?

**KA:** From 1967 until the Playhouse was developed in the summer of 1970, theatre productions were held in the auditorium/gymnasium because that was the only suitable space for a large audience. At one end of the gym floor was the stage for theatrical events. It had a forty-foot proscenium, was supplied with an act curtain, stage curtains, light board, and a small flat-storage area. A classroom in Van Peurse Hall had a rudimentary stage with curtains in which we performed class directing and acting scenes. The room could hold perhaps forty people, hardly enough for a public event. A stage was also present in the former gymnasium on the second floor of Van Peurse where daily chapel was held. But the auditorium/gymnasium was the only facility capable of holding a large audience. As a result the facility had become a battle zone fought over by the athletic department for athletic practices and games, the music department for rehearsals and concerts, the theatre department for rehearsals and concerts, the community for public events, and the college administration for college events. In addition, during the day physical education classes were held on the gym floor.

As you can imagine, scheduling was a nightmare, because everybody wanted to use the facility at the same time. The nightmare scenario was especially acute during basketball season. Because Dr. England had reserved the facility for the year early the previous spring, she was deluged with “requests” to relinquish her right of reservation. I was aware of the “request to relinquish” whenever we had a change in the rehearsal or production schedule after it was announced. She became especially perturbed when other departments or the college administration would encroach upon her times and space, declaring that if they were adequately organized, they would have reserved the facility.

I remember one particular time when the football team was to hold a night practice, and because a soggy field was being torn up by the cleats of the players, ninety (perhaps I exaggerate) muddy players entered the space to complete their practice indoors. Cleats on the floor make a lot of noise, and ninety football players cannot be quiet. On that occasion we lost the battle and finished rehearsal earlier than planned. The good doctor was not pleased.

**NW:** What do you see as Dr. England’s legacy?

**KA:** During the 1950s and 1960s theatre was not acceptable in very many Christian colleges. I remember when I told my parents in 1960 that I was to become a teacher of theatre, they were surprised that I would delve into the field of the devil. When in 1967 I announced that I would teach theatre at a Christian college, they were dismayed and bewildered. How could a Christian college permit theatre on campus—and even more, have a department of theatre? When other Christian colleges were anti-theatre, Northwestern was developing a major in theatre. Just prior to Dr. England’s retirement a

new organization was born, Christians in the Theatre Arts, an organization composed of academics and professional theatre people. Surprise was often registered when Northwestern and a handful of Christian Colleges announced that they had a theatre department.

Because of Theora England theatre is accepted at Northwestern. Sometime during her tenure she had established a tradition. She had labored in the department for years and had transformed theatre into a legitimate discipline. I don't know when the struggle to bring legitimacy to theatre was won, but in 1967 theatre had accomplished something at Northwestern that was found in few Christian colleges.

Theatre in a Christian college could serve the Kingdom of God. In fact, Theora had accomplished more than acceptance for her discipline; she had accomplished some admired resentment. I was told she had "built an empire." In some way theatre was equated with music and art as a legitimate discipline. No, theatre did not enjoy the prestige of music or art, but it was acceptable and legitimate—no small accomplishment. Theora's "empire" was helped in no small measure by President Lars Granberg, who viewed the arts a liberating tools that, when brought to bear in a student's career, could be used to liberate the students and be most useful as a tool for critical thinking. The legacy of Theora England is that, with the required acceptance of theatre as a legitimate discipline worthy of study in a Christian college, the department could move forward to greater accomplishments.

**NW:** You have said that Theora England had a strong personality, but also that, had she not had that strong personality, as a woman she would not have been able to accomplish what she did.

**KA:** Oh, I don't think so. Certainly in the fifties and early sixties Northwestern was a very male-dominated institution. When I came here, Florence Huffman in education, and "Ma" Schutter in English, were dominant forces along with Dr. England. Fern Smith, formerly in music, had a reputation for being a strong figure. But remember that women were expected to be in the disciplines of education, English, and music. It was women as theatre directors that were unusual. Women as actors, yes, but women as directors, not even today. Theatre, unlike English, education, and music, invades much territory occupied by other disciplines. It is a hybrid form utilizing speech, music, the visual arts of painting and sculpture. It walks upon a painted stage and asks actors to use physical objects. It dresses its actors in period clothing appropriate to the characters depicted. It depends to psychologically represent humanity in many guises. At Northwestern, theatre, headed by a female, invaded separate disciplines. A female of less courage, of weaker personality, of less endurance, would have wilted, and the theatre program would not have made its way to its present position. That is just my view as a late comer arriving from the outside.

In my early years at Northwestern, I heard many stories of Dr. England engaging the male domination of the college. Without a strong personality, a woman would have been defeated before she got very far.



*Joan Terpstra Anderson interviewed Keith Allen, and the interview was taped. By prior agreement, Allen edited the interview, and Anderson made minor changes to the edited interview.*