

A Celebration of the Life of Carl Djerassi

Saturday, March 7, 2015

Woodside, California

Bassam Shakhshiri's Remarks:

Carl Djerassi was my friend. I miss him with sadness. I miss him with affection.

We are gathered here to celebrate his life with joy and fondness. I celebrate his life by celebrating freedom. He was a fellow immigrant who flourished in the freedom in America.

We celebrate who he was and what he accomplished. We stand in awe of his influence on humanity. If it weren't for Carl Djerassi, the world today would be a very different place.

We were struck and affected by his personality. I am grateful to have known him personally. I was always touched by his tenderness.

I first encountered Carl Djerassi while searching the scientific literature 50 years ago when I was a graduate student. I noticed that he had publications in many different areas of chemistry, though not in my field.

After I joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin in 1970, I learned that Djerassi had completed his PhD degree there in less than two and half years. I wondered then if anyone has matched or beaten that time, and I can tell you today that no one has even come close.

In Madison in the 1950s, Professor William Johnson wanted to recruit Carl to join the Wisconsin faculty when Carl was in Mexico. But that did not happen because in 1959 Johnson moved to Stanford and asked Carl to join that faculty.

Johnson and Carl successfully negotiated with the Stanford provost a condition for their move: a new chemistry building constructed to their own specifications. This was the beginning of the rise of Stanford's chemistry department to what is now. It started with two Wisconsin people, and a third Wisconsinite Gene Van Tamelen followed in 1962.

Carl was a superb chemist. He is widely recognized for his work, especially for the syntheses of hormones, antihistamines, and natural products. His initial work was in synthesis and his first publication with his PhD advisor Al Wilds was in 1946 in the Journal of the American Chemical Society. He was to publish 350 papers in this most prestigious journal. During a 60-year active research career he published over 1248 scientific papers, averaging 21 publications per year.

One of his students and former collaborators, Catherine Fenselau is here today. (Perhaps) there are others too.

Carl was ambitious and always competitive. He appreciated the wide recognition he received: the National Medal of Science, the National Medal of Technology, several awards from the American Chemical Society including its highest award the Priestley Medal, and numerous prizes, medals, honorary degrees, citations, and proclamations from around the world.

When Carl chose to stop his scientific research he became consumed by creative writing. He immersed himself in writing poetry, fiction, and plays. Through these writings he investigated himself and his situation. Carl wrote extensively about his life journey, about his struggles with identity, and his search for belonging.

Carl published three memoirs, several novels, numerous plays, including the play OXYGEN with Roald Hoffmann, collections of poetry and essays, and one art book—271 entries on his literary list. That's more than many scientists publish in the scientific literature in a lifetime! The University of Wisconsin Press published four of those books. I consider *This Man's Pill* to be his best autobiography.

It was always a joyful experience to be with Carl at his apartment in San Francisco, at my home in Madison, at large gatherings of scientists and artists in New York, San Francisco, Dortmund, Indianapolis, everywhere. He could be elegantly charming with a wry, playful sense of humor.

I had the pleasure of being with Carl at several of his plays. He was happy with comments I made about his writing. He was interested in what literary critics had to say, too, although he didn't give them the last word. He once sent me an email message from New York saying: "The premiere of PHALLACY was wonderful-- performance, actors, public, etc.—but the reviews terribly mixed [he gave me links to the reviews]. Playwriting is a very tough occupation and one needs a very thick skin or else give up. I am **not** giving up."

Carl Djerassi is the most distinguished alumnus of the Wisconsin chemistry department. He has contributed personally and directly to the creative and intellectual life of our faculty and students in chemistry and other parts of our university. His visits to Madison were always eagerly anticipated. He left everyone and especially my creative writing and theatre colleagues buzzing for days after his visits.

Carl was a fellow American. Carl was a citizen of the world. He was a force of nature.

We miss him. The world has much to learn from his writings. Much to learn about ourselves and about each other. Much to learn about love. Carl Djerassi loved us and we loved him.