

FACULTY OBITUARIES

University Mourns Legendary Theater Educator

Acclaimed artist **James Spruill** was an actor, a director, and a leader in African American theater

By John O'Rourke

To say that James Spruill, a retired College of Fine Arts associate professor of theater arts, was a renaissance man would be an understatement. Over the course of a five-decade career, Spruill, who died of pancreatic cancer on December 31, 2010, at age 73, made his mark as an actor, a director, and a leader in the African American theater community. But he is remembered first and foremost as an impassioned, dynamic educator—a man who taught and mentored generations of theater majors at BU.

“Jim Spruill was unfiltered, provocative, nurturing, challenging, and, most of all, devoted to his students and the art of teaching acting,” recalls Nina Tassler (CFA’79), a BU trustee and president of CBS Entertainment. “I remember always feeling secure in his class; he allowed us to be daring and encouraged us to take risks.”

Spruill (CFA’75) came to Boston as an actor in the mid ’60s, joining the Theater Company of Boston, a young company that included Paul Benedict and Stockard Channing. Decades later, Spruill would recall, “I knew I wasn’t going to Hollywood to make

WEB EXTRA
Read more
obituaries
at [bu.edu/
bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

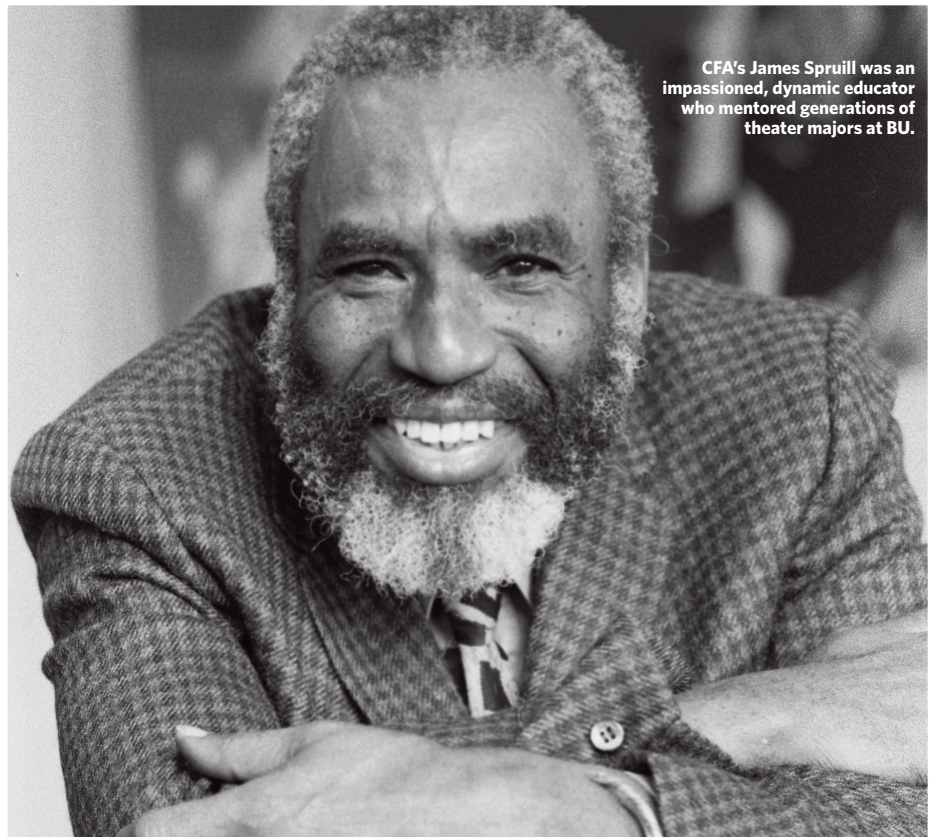
black exploitation movies, so I decided I needed a teaching credential.” He enrolled in the School of Theatre to pursue an MFA in directing in 1968, the same year the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59) was assassinated. He was the first person to receive the Martin Luther King, Jr., Fellowship, established by BU trustees to honor King’s ideals and awarded annually to an outstanding African American graduate student.

In his first year at BU, Spruill cofounded, with fellow actor Gus Johnson, the New African Company, a Boston-based theater company that continues to operate today. For

more than four decades, the company has mounted the work of African American playwrights on stages across Boston, as well as in schools, colleges, prisons, and hospitals. Part of their motivation in founding the company, Spruill said, was to give African American actors a reliable showcase to display their talents.

In 1976, Spruill joined the CFA faculty, and over the next three decades taught classes in acting, directing, theater history, and literature. He retired in 2006.

William Lacey, a CFA professor emeritus of theater, voice, speech, and acting and former director of the School of Theatre, was Spruill’s



CFA's James Spruill was an impassioned, dynamic educator who mentored generations of theater majors at BU.

KALMAN ZABARSKY

graduate thesis advisor. Lacey says Spruill brought an extraordinary sensitivity to his work as a teacher.

"Many speak of the dignity of the individual," says Lacey, "but few passionately give themselves over to the means of instilling and nurturing that dignity in the young. Jim understood the frightful adolescence that many confronted and sought to open doors. He did so in his teaching as well as through community action."

Upon learning of Spruill's death, former students were quick to recall both his talent on stage and his gift for mentoring. Tony Award-winning actor Jason Alexander (CFA'81, Hon.'95), who appeared with Spruill in a BU production of *Othello* in 1980, fondly remembers his former teacher.

"Jim was particularly kind and supportive of me while I was at BU," Alexander says. "His focus and critique were the most practical and transformative of any I was privy to during my training there." Alexander says Spruill was an "odd, passionate, kind, dedicated man and artist. I would like to think he has made a profound impression on many of his students and fellow artists."

Gregg Ward (CFA'82), another student who shared the stage with Spruill in *Othello*, recalls that Spruill was "mesmerizing" in the title role. "He made an incredibly powerful impression on many," he says.

In addition to his many performances in Boston theater, Spruill appeared on television, including in an acclaimed PBS version of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and in many movies, among them the Steven Spielberg (Hon.'09) film *Amistad*. He also had roles in films made by his son, Robert Patton-Spruill (CAS'92, COM'94), such as *Squeeze* and *Body Count*.

Over the course of his distinguished career, Spruill received many accolades, including the prestigious Elliot Norton Award and, in 2003, CFA's Distinguished Faculty Award.

Speaking of his longtime friend and former colleague, Lacey recalls a man who "loved a theater that was generous and full-blooded, if nuanced, and went for it in his work."

Educator, Mentor, Poet

Richard Ely was a popular psychology instructor

By John O'Rourke

RICHARD ELY, A College of Arts & Sciences instructor in psychology and a leading authority on the acquisition of language in children, was an extraordinarily popular teacher of undergraduates and a beloved mentor to scores of BU students.

"Whether he was lecturing to a class of 200 students or supervising the research of a single individual, he brought to bear his full effort and remarkable capacity for engaging and inspiring students," says Michael J. Lyons, a CAS psychology professor and department chair. "We have lost a beloved colleague and an exceptional educator."

Ely (SON'79) died on January 7, 2011, after a brief illness. He was 63.

Ely's route to his area of expertise was decidedly unconventional. He earned a BA in French from Tufts University, but spent the next decade working as a carpenter and general contractor. During that time, he also earned a BS at the BU School of Nursing. He then worked as a staff nurse and later head nurse at the Pediatric Emergency Unit at Boston City Hospital, now Boston Medical Center.

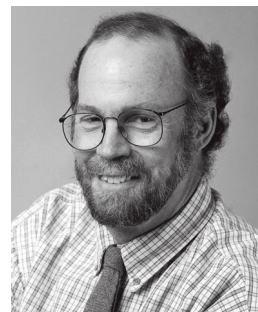
After completing a master's in maternal and child health nursing at Boston College in 1990, Ely embarked on what would become his abiding field of interest—language and child development—earning a PhD from Tufts in 1993, the same year he joined BU's faculty.

Colleagues were devastated on learning of Ely's death. Joanne Hebden Palfai, psychology department director of academic affairs, recalls "the most wonderful friend and colleague anyone could imagine." She describes Ely as a person of "tremendous integrity."

A similar sentiment was voiced by Ely's former mentor and colleague Jean Berko Gleason, a CAS psychology professor emerita. "He was an immensely principled and caring man. He loved his students, and they loved him."

Ely taught several popular courses, including Psychology of Personality: Theories and Application and Experimental Psychology: Personality, both of which he was scheduled to teach last semester.

He was renowned for his research into how young children use language to express



RICHARD ELY had a remarkable capacity for engaging and inspiring students, says Michael J. Lyons, a College of Arts & Sciences psychology professor and department chair.

themselves. At the time of his death, he was studying the ways that personal narratives reflect aspects of personality in children and adults. Ely had also studied the role of language play, quotations, and apologies as related to children.

"The field has lost someone who really advanced our knowledge of not just language development in young children," says Gleason, "but how language reveals their developing personalities."

Admired for his gift for mentoring, Ely was often selected to preside over the psychology department's convocation ceremony.

In addition to his research, teaching, and mentoring, Ely was an accomplished poet, publishing more than 20 poems in a dozen poetry journals.

"His work in each of his fields was characterized by excellence and integrity," Lyons says.