A Sketch of the Life of Thomas E. Moisan

Born on September 14, 1948, in New York City, Tom was given the name Thomas Edward on the recommendation of his grandfather, a journalist who covered Albany politics and was convinced that Thomas Edward Dewey would win the 1948 Presidential election. He spent his first ten years in a cold-water flat on the edge of Greenwich Village, where, under the tutelage of his older brother, he began to develop an encyclopedic knowledge of movies and became an ardent Yankees fan. As an adult, Tom found in the financial constraints of his youth a rich source of entertaining stories, as well as a genuine empathy with poor people.

Tom’s public school education came to an early end when he was expelled from kindergarten for kicking his teacher. The following fall he enrolled in the first grade at St. Joseph School, and thus began sixteen years of Catholic education. He graduated from Xavier High School in Manhattan and the College of the Holy Cross before earning his doctorate in English literature from Harvard University in 1978. After teaching at Middlebury College, Arkansas State University, and the University of Mary Washington, he came to Saint Louis University as chairman of its English Department in 1989 and served in that capacity for ten years.

Tom is loved and remembered by his family and friends as a man of great learning, wit, integrity, and passion. A distinguished Shakespearean scholar, he published essays on Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, and The Taming of the Shrew, in addition to co-editing a noteworthy collection, In the Company of Shakespeare: Essays in Honor of G. Blakemore Evans. He also was the editor of Allegorica, a journal of medieval and renaissance scholarship.

At the time of his death, Tom was working on a book about the material culture of seventeenth-century England and its interest in “collectibles,” linking the poetry of Robert Herrick, the art of Wenceslaus Hollar, the writings of John Evelyn, and the collection amassed by the two royal gardeners who opened England’s first public museum. Research for this project took him to London and Oxford, and portions of it reached fruition in the form of conference papers and a published essay.

Tom was active in the Shakespeare Association of America, the Renaissance Society of America, the Modern Language Association, and the South Central Renaissance Conference, of which he served as President. In St. Louis, he gave pre-performance talks at the summer Shakespeare festival in Forest Park and helped the Saint Louis University Library Associates to select the recipients of their annual literary award. His teaching, which ranged from Shakespeare to the literature of New York to the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, was remarkable not only for its breadth but also for the striking connections that he made — playing a song by Fats Waller, for example, in a course on Hamlet, or showing a scene from Lady and the Tramp to graduate students of literary theory.

A master of the deft turn of the phrase as well as of complex prose, Tom was a wonderful conversationalist, engaging friends, colleagues, and students in erudite sparring and amusing them with droll observations. While his verbal excesses exceeded his physical dexterity, he always found a way to out-finesse his opponents in badminton, croquet, miniature golf, and any other game calling for a clever strategy.

When Chair of the English Department and subsequently as Graduate Program Director, he amply displayed his talent for strategy in developing academic programs and in his fierce defense of academic integrity. He stood firmly against the corrupt exercise of power, whether in the academy or in government, and was active in opposing war and promoting peace and social justice.

Tom was passionate in his beliefs and engagements. He loved opera, old movies, and baseball. He loved strolling down the streets of New York, along the shores of New England and California, and through the Saint Louis Zoo and the Missouri Botanical Garden. He was devoted to his students, colleagues, and friends. Most of all, he was devoted to his wife, Chris, who sustained him through his long struggle against cancer and with whom he shared a loving marriage.

Tom died on July 30, 2006. He was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is also the final resting place of the Shakespearean actor Edwin Booth. In addition to his wife of 32 years, he leaves a nephew, Andrew Moisan, who is the son of Elizabeth Moisan and Tom’s late brother, Peter. He is greatly missed.