

Martha Coigney: Global Catalytic Force, Constant Co-conspirator

The late TCG staffer and ITI-U.S. director imbued her work with joie de vivre and love.

BY [MICHAEL FIELDS](#)

Martha Coigney was my mentor and my friend. She fundamentally changed the way I experienced the world, not just of theatre, but of life. When I met her, she told me that she just knew we would become great “co-conspirators.” I know that she had a great many “co-conspirators” around the world, and I was honored to join that company.

I came onto the board of [Theatre Communications Group](#) at the time the U.S. Center of the [International Theatre Institute](#) (ITI) was being moved into TCG. Martha had singlehandedly run [ITI-U.S.](#) for 35 years. She became president of ITI-Worldwide in 1987, taking over from the renowned Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. My role on the TCG board soon became all about ITI, serving for a few years as president of ITI-U.S. under Martha’s tutelage. I would arrive in New York City and the red light on the hotel phone in my room would already be lit with a short message from Martha: “Drop your stuff. Come on up. We’ll have a drink and talk.”

The first time this happened I had no idea what to expect. She opened the door to her Upper East Side apartment and her dog, a large poodle named Lola, lunged for my crotch. Martha pulled her off affectionately, asked what I wanted to drink, told me to keep the dog away from the food, and strode off into the kitchen. The dog, being a dog, was all about that food. I tugged her firmly away. Finally Lola managed to get a nose full of butter and sat contentedly licking an object at the end of the table. As I went to move it, I discovered it was the Tony Award given to Martha for lifetime achievement. And it was now covered in butter and dog drool. I looked up for a napkin only to see a cornucopia of posters, mementos, paintings, remnants of Russian guests the night before, a suitcase a Hungarian director left years ago, and the Croix de Guerre given to her late husband [Rodolphe Coigney](#), a French war hero and former head of the [World Health Organization](#). I was to find out that every object had a story. And each story was part of an international, interconnected, tapestry that Martha wove with great passion and compassion over the course of her life. Then Martha came in

with drinks, had a deep laugh at her buttered award. The conversation began and continued until her passing.

It was so much more than a conversation, really. Being with Martha was to enter a living history that crossed the Iron Curtain, linking artists amidst the detritus and divisions of the Cold War. Being with Martha was to be introduced to theatremakers from every corner of the world who yearned to connect with each other across borders and traditions. Being with Martha was to join a global community that believed in the theatre's important role in the health of humanity. And being with Martha was to do all with a genuine joie de vivre and love.

I had the pleasure of traveling with Martha all over the world. She was an inveterate traveler and seemingly knew everyone. At one point, when her husband fell ill, she could not attend a gathering of the ITI Centers of the Americas. The U.S. had not attended this meeting in more than 20 years, and she felt it was very important to be there. She asked if I could go in her place; I told her my Spanish was just plain bad. She said, "Don't worry, just say you are there for me." I went to Mexico City and walked into the room. I was met with icy stares. I took my place. The nametag said "Martha Coigney" on it. After a long silence someone asked, "Where is Marta?" I gave an explanation in broken Spanish. Another long silence. Then that same someone said, "Okay, then you will be Marta." Smiles all around. And for the next three days, I was "Marta." That is what I will call the "Martha Effect": a legendary generosity combined with the ability to open hearts anywhere in the world.

Martha [wrote](#), in *American Theatre's* 2002 international May/June issue, Theatre is the art of story, the art of disappearance, and the momentary mirror of human life. No matter how much is written analyzing, archiving, and recording theatre work, it disappears—each night—only to reappear "for the first time" at another moment. Tomorrow, next week, next century. ...As a global gathering of theatre people, ITI has promoted, protected, and defended theatre artists, their work, their opinions, and, in some cases, their lives. ...We are catalysts. ...Our continuity is the memory of the future.

That was Martha. And what a catalytic force she was in this world. I will miss her deeply. But I know that she lives on in the work and lives of people she touched in all corners of this globe...her dear "co-conspirators."

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