

BELLA ITKIN-KONRATH 1920-2011

'Dr. Bella' influenced generations of actors

By Margaret Ramirez
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Bella Itkin-Konrath, 90, a renowned acting teacher lovingly known as "Dr. Bella" who taught several generations of American actors, died of natural causes Wednesday, Feb. 9 at St. Joseph Hospital, according to DePaul University officials.

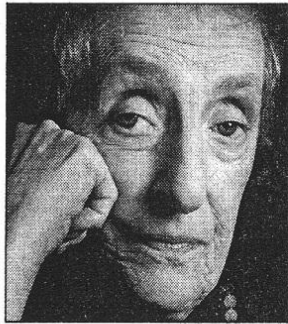
Ms. Itkin taught at The Theatre School at DePaul University, formerly the Goodman School of Drama, for 47 years. She continued to mentor students and remained a fixture at the school until only recently.

For more than 70 years, she influenced Chicago theater and the American theater at large, nurturing the careers of students including Linda Hunt, Harvey Korman, Elizabeth Perkins, Michael Rooker, Kevin O'Connor and Joe Mantegna.

Tony-nominated actor Kevin Anderson said he met Ms. Itkin when he was 18, and she changed his life.

"She was an extraordinary teacher," Anderson said. "She gave me the confidence to believe in myself and she also gave me the acting tools to succeed. I wouldn't be who I was without Bella."

Born in Russia, she was 12 when she immigrated to Chicago in 1932 with her mother and sister. Her father, David Itkin, a member of the Moscow Art Theatre's Jewish Theatre, had already settled in Chicago, finding work as a teacher at DePaul University's drama department and the Goodman School. Bella soon became her father's assist-



Bella Itkin-Konrath

ant.

She studied at what was then the Goodman School and received a master of fine arts degree in 1943, and later a doctorate from Case Western University. She also studied with the legendary acting teacher Sanford Meisner in New York.

In 1944, Ms. Itkin founded the Lake Zurich Playhouse, a theater that gave Geraldine Page, among others, her start. At the Goodman and DePaul, she directed more than 200 student productions including "The Seagull," "Romeo and Juliet," "Toys in the Attic," "The Cherry Orchard," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and the Chicago premiere of Tennessee Williams' "Eccentricities of a Nightingale."

Anderson said Ms. Itkin's passion for the theater inspired him.

"If you looked over at her, as the lights were going off and the play was about to start, you could see this look of total joy and passion. She just loved it," Anderson said.

In the theater, she also found love. During a 1967 Goodman production of "Hamlet," she met a carpenter, Frank Konrath. They married and remained together until his

death in 2002.

In her book, "Acting: Preparation, Practice, Performance," she defined an acting technique based on sensory response. The text takes an actor through "experience exercises" that focus on each of the five senses to explore physical and emotional relationships as they relate to the subtext of a scene.

Ms. Itkin also served as artistic director of the Goodman Children's Theatre, now known as Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences. She directed "Treasure Island," "Puss in Boots," "A Doctor in Spite of Himself," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and others, laying the foundation for a thriving children's theater scene in Chicago.

She retired from full-time teaching in 1989 and continued to teach part-time until 2000.

Ms. Itkin was awarded the Sara Spencer Award from the Children's Theatre Association in 1980 for long-term contributions to children's theater in the United States, DePaul University's Via Sapientiae Award in 1990 and the Joseph Jefferson Lifetime Achievement Award.

She leaves no immediate survivors.

Visitation will be from 3 to 8 p.m. Friday at Rago Brothers Funeral Home, 624 N. Western Ave., Chicago. Mass will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Vincent de Paul Church, 1010 W. Webster Ave., Chicago.

Tribune theater critic Chris Jones contributed.

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BELLA ITKIN-KONRATH | 1920-2011

Drama teacher nurtured generations at DePaul

OBITUARY | Influenced actors, directors such as Page, Korman, Mantegna

BY HEDY WEISS

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They called her "Dr. Bella."

It was a title of playful affection and respect, but it also was an appellation that could stir terror in the hearts of the thousands of acting and directing students who attended her classes at the Theatre School of DePaul University (formerly the Goodman School of Drama) over a career that spanned 47 years.

The classes taught by Dr. Bella Itkin-Konrath, who also directed more than 200 productions during her long career, were legendary. Virtually every top actor, actress and director who attended the DePaul or Goodman schools came under her influence, with a list that includes the late Geraldine Page, Harvey Korman and Lois Nettleton, as well as Linda Hunt, Melinda Dillon, Joe Mantegna, Elizabeth Perkins, Charlayne Woodard, Danny Goldring, Kevin Anderson, Larry Yando, Nick Bowling, Concetta Tomei and countless others.

Ms. Itkin-Konrath, 90, died Wednesday at St. Joseph Hospital, a few blocks from her Lake View home.

A short, solidly built woman with enormous, probing eyes and indefatigable energy, she had a particular flair for delivering take-no-prisoners critiques spoken with the distinctive traces of a Russian accent that had remained with her since



Bella Itkin-Konrath, who died Wednesday at age 90, taught at DePaul and the Goodman School of Drama for 47 years.

childhood. And when she commented that a scene was full of "phony baloney," she could shake the foundations of her students' egos, though they knew (or would come to realize) that they would be better for the dressing-down.

"I always remember Bella best as looking at you with her head tilted, peering at you over her glasses, daring you not to be telling the truth, whether in performance or otherwise," Mantegna wrote for an alumni association tribute to his teacher in 1990. "It took me years to discover that beneath that intense gaze beats the heart of a pussycat."

Born in Russia, Ms. Itkin-Konrath was 12 when she arrived in the United States in 1932 with her mother and sister. Her father, David Itkin, who had been a member of Habima, the Moscow Art Theatre's Jewish company, had settled in Chicago and

was teaching and directing at DePaul and the Goodman, where Bella became her father's assistant. In 1944, Itkin began the Lake Zurich Playhouse summer theater, where Page's and Nettleton's youthful talents were showcased. She received her master of fine arts degree from the Goodman School of Drama, studied with Sanford Meisner and earned her doctorate from Case Western Reserve University.

At the Goodman and DePaul, Ms. Itkin-Konrath was known for her productions of the plays of Anton Chekhov, Tennessee Williams and other classics.

For 15 years, Ms. Itkin-Konrath served as artistic director of the Goodman Children's Theatre.

Although she retired from full-time teaching in 1989 and was named professor emeritus of acting at the Theatre School, Ms. Itkin-

Konrath, a recipient of the Joseph Jefferson Lifetime Achievement Award, taught part time until 2000.

In 1994, her book *Acting: Preparation, Practice, Performance* was published. The book leads an actor through "sensory exercises," focusing on the use of the five senses to explore relationships.

"When I think of Bella, I think of a force of nature," said DePaul's John Culbert. "She and her father before her had enormous impact on the school, and on its many generations of students. And I think in her approach to teaching acting what comes to mind is that she was the Martha Graham of theater. She drove her students to discover honesty, and to work from the center of their being, their core, rather than their head. ... She had the best antenna for truth and honesty of anyone around, and for that reason just being in her presence could be daunting."

Ms. Itkin married Frank Konrath in 1967, six months after he arrived at the Goodman to work as a carpenter. The couple, who made frequent trips to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada, were together until his death in 2002.

Visitation is from 3 to 8 p.m. today at Rago Brothers Funeral Home, 624 N. Western. The funeral service will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Vincent DePaul Church, 1010 W. Webster.

The Theatre School will hold a memorial for the community at a later date.