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## Br Augustine Denis "Bro" Towey

<b>BIRTH</b>	30 Jun 1937
<b>DEATH</b>	22 Nov 2012 (aged 75) Pennsylvania, USA
<b>BURIAL</b>	Saint Joseph Seminary Cemetery Princeton, Mercer County, New Jersey, USA
<b>MEMORIAL ID</b>	104530499

Brother Augustine Towey, who led Niagara University's theater department for 42 years and built it into one of the most prestigious undergraduate theater programs in the United States, died Thursday in Philadelphia after a long illness. He was 75.

Towey – known affectionately as "Bro" by his students, fellow faculty and friends throughout the theater world – came to Niagara University in 1963 to teach English. He soon took charge of the school's extracurricular theater group and began molding it into a productive and highly sought-after program, which he led until his retirement in 2005.

Across his storied career at Niagara, Towey directed more than 135 productions.

Towey remained active at Niagara and in the Western New York theater community after his retirement, but fell ill in 2010 and moved to St. Vincent's Seminary in Philadelphia.

As news of his death spread across social media, an outpouring of support came from across the local theater community and beyond.

"I think his influence was massive in theater in Western New York, and primarily through Niagara

University, through the theater program. He really built that single-handedly, he had a vision for it, he set a bar for it," said Irish Classical Theatre Company co-founder and artistic director Vincent O'Neill, who frequently worked with Towey. "It's immeasurable what he added. He truly was a visionary and his knowledge of theater was phenomenal. It was quite extraordinary, just the depth of his knowledge of every area of theater."

Throughout his extensive career as an educator and director, Towey cultivated friendships and collaborations not only with area producers and actors, but with major figures from New York City theater. Perhaps his longest and most fruitful relationship was with John Kander and the late Fred Ebb, the team behind the musicals "Chicago," "Cabaret" and "Kiss of the Spider Woman."

Kander, who spoke to The Buffalo News from New York City, met Towey on his first trip with Ebb to Niagara University to work with students on a production of "Chicago."

"We both almost immediately became enamored and involved with the department and with Brother Augustine," he said. "We were unbelievably impressed with what he had created up there and our connection with him and the department continued for years. He did a lot of productions of pieces of ours and we became very close friends as well."

Kander and O'Neill both described Towey as intellectually gifted, uncommonly open-minded, passionate and articulate about the theater. Kander recalled an incident during a question-and-answer event at NU in which Towey gave a characteristically virtuosic response to a crass question.

"There was somebody from the paper who asked how it was that a Catholic university would have the temerity to put on a piece of obscenity like 'Chicago.' And Brother Augustine did half an hour, at least, talking about the definition of obscenity. It was breathtaking, and whoever it was had no more questions."

Brother Augustine Towey was born Denis Joseph Towey June 30, 1937 in Hempstead, on Long Island. He was ordained as a member of the Vincentian Order in October 1961.

He earned his doctorate in theater from New York University along with a certificate in Shakespeare and

Elizabethan theatre from the University of Birmingham in England and a masters degree in dramatic literature from St. John's University in New York City.

After arriving to teach at Niagara in 1963 at the age of 27, he gradually helped to form the school's theater program, which officially became a concentration at the school in 1975 and an official department in the late 1980s.

He was a longtime board member for Artpark in Lewiston, where he directed dozens of productions and founded and directed the Artpark Repertory Theatre from 1975 to 2003.

While at Niagara, he wrote several plays – including "Vincent in Heaven" and "Letters from Niagara" – along with an opera, "A Beggar's Christmas." He received several local and national awards for his work, including the Niagara University medal of honor in 1989, the Artvoice Artie Award for career achievement in 1997 and a 2006 outstanding artist award from the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County.

Niagara theater department chair Sharon Watkinson, who was a student of Towey's when he started at Niagara, credited him with laying the groundwork for a theater program that continues to power along in his absence and lamented the fact the he would not be around to see the fruits of his labor.

"You just wanted to please Bro. You wanted to be a part of his team and you wanted to just make him happy. He created in all of us this sense of being able to create something from nothing, from a simple word on the page. To make something happen and to make it happen collaboratively," she said. "We're all still reaping the benefits of all of that. If it had not been for Bro that would not have happened. That was his vision. He just always believed it was going to happen, it was going to happen. And it did."

Dozens of actors and directors working on the local theater scene and beyond are, in some senses, products of Towey's tenure at Niagara. They include familiar names like Paul Todaro, Maureen Poerter, Cassie Gorniewicz and dozens of others.

While at Niagara, Towey also directed 10 productions for the Irish Classical Theatre Company, where he is fondly remembered as much for his thoughtful and visionary directing as for his often self-

deprecating sense of humor.

"We were taking a walk one day and he said to me, 'You know Vincent, when I was ordained as a priest I took three vows: a vow of obedience, a vow of poverty and a vow of chastity. And I've kept two out of the three, which is not a bad percentage. I think Christ would be happy with that when I get up there.'"

Towey was also a lifelong devotee of poetry and a prolific poet himself. His work is collected in the 2008 book, "The Poem You Asked For." His latest book of poetry, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph: Pieces for the Holy Family," was released earlier this year.

Buffalo News, November 23, 2012.

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He is survived by his sisters Anne Towey and Brenda Romanski, a niece and a nephew. He is predeceased by his brother Douglas.

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**Created by:** Donna Casey

Added: Feb 2, 2013

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