Alumnus of the month

Introduction
Professor Peter Meineck graduated from the UCL Department of Greek and Latin in 1989 with a BA Honours degree in Ancient World Studies. He went on to take his PhD at the University of Nottingham. He is founding Director of Aquila Theatre and is also Professor of Classics at New York University.

Peter brought the Aquila Theatre to UCL in June 2015 to perform excerpts from *A Female Philoctetes*: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/events/FemalePhiloctetes](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/events/FemalePhiloctetes), with a cast of US and UK Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. The company later travelled to Greece to perform the full play.

What did you enjoy most about your time in Greek and Latin and at UCL?
I can honestly say that becoming a student in the Department of Greek and Latin was a life-changing experience for me. I was the first person in my family to go to university and I had been expelled from school in south London at the age of 15. UCL seemed a classless place to me – no-one cared about where you were from but only about your drive and intelligence. At UCL, the whole world opened up for me and I realised that there was a huge range of opportunities available to me. I also made lifelong friends and I found the academic staff incredibly welcoming. I studied for a degree in Ancient World Studies, which was Dr Alan Griffiths’ baby. The degree bridged the gap for people like me who had not studied Classics before,

Actually, I had intended to have a military career, rather than becoming an academic, and I was a reserve in the marines, whilst I was at UCL. So, a couple of times each week and every other weekend, I went to train with them. It felt like leading a double life as the two worlds did not really complement each other. I found myself becoming more and more involved in academic work and also in the theatre.

In fact, it was at UCL that I began my lifelong passion for the theatre. I was very active in the Classical Society and several fellow students (Jim Kerr, Robert Altham et al) and I founded the Greek Play in translation at UCL, which still takes place every February at The Bloomsbury Theatre. Of course, at the time, UCL and KCL were huge rivals and Kings already had its tradition of performing a Greek Play in Ancient Greek. Professor Pat Easterling had come from Cambridge and she could not understand the rivalry between the two colleges and founded the Festival of Greek
Drama in London, partly in an attempt to bring together everyone who loved Greek plays. Whilst at UCL, I started work as a lighting technician at The Bloomsbury Theatre and then I got freelance work in West End theatre. I was fortunate to work with Martin Godfrey, who was originally at The Bloomsbury and then at the National Theatre.

What was your career path like after leaving UCL?
I started work in the theatre and, with other UCL students, I got together with a cabaret-style theatre company called “The London Small Theatre Company”. (I have always been involved in producing and directing, rather than acting.) We took Aristophanes’ *Clouds* on a tour of the US and Europe. We survived by operating out of a small van and taking cheap standby flights but, when we were in New York, we received a favourable review in the *New York Times* and became a huge hit. In 1991, I formed the Aquila Theatre company, again touring in the US and Canada. Actually, in the US, we were best known for our Shakespeare rather than our Greek Drama! At this time, I was also publishing translations with Hackett Publications and was teaching workshops and masterclasses at American and Canadian universities. I was a visiting scholar in Classics at the University of Texas at Austin and I became an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina at the age of 29. I brought Aquila theatre there too as it was a really great way to run a company as we rehearsed shows for most of the year and then I spent the summer at the Center for Hellenic Studies in DC working on my translation of the Oresteia.
After this, Matthew Santirocco, the Dean of NYU brought the company to New York with a core of UK and US actors and gave us office space and an appointment for me at the Tisch School for the Arts and then classics. We were the first UK company to be approved by US Equity to have both UK and US artists. Our first show was a movement-based version of *The Iliad* at Lincoln Centre, which again was a huge hit with Hollywood stars regularly attending performances! Most of the NY critics didn’t get the show except the all powerful *New York Times* and *New Yorker*, although they all but ignored our next show – that’s New York Theatre for you! We built up a large tour circuit for classical theatre – some 70 cities and we performed four plays a year in New York, touring two of them. It was a crazy schedule! Again, our Shakespeare productions were really popular and our production of *Much Ado about Nothing* ran throughout the 9/11. New Yorkers really took it to their heart and it ran for a year.

By this time, I was rather burnt out with so many shows and I had married and had kids. So, I took a full-time post at NYU whilst simultaneously working on my PhD at the University of Nottingham. My supervisor was Alan Sommerstein and I completed the PhD in two years – it was very demanding as I used to do a full day at work, then work on my thesis from 8 p.m. until 4 a.m. every night. My research focuses on finding the language to talk about performance which is why it partly falls into the field of cognitive neuroscience. For instance, use of the mask in Greek drama changes the emotions felt by the audience – modern audiences tend to think of the mask as a distancing technique but it wasn’t for an Ancient Greek audience. It is really interesting to ask the big questions, for example why did Athenian drama spread all over the world? In studying Classics, modern students focus on the text but, in the fifth century, text was not of primary importance and nor was it set in stone. For the most part, plays were created as compositions, not texts, as music was so important to the experience. In this way, performance is able to take us to the heart of Greek drama in a way in which study of the text alone cannot. That’s why cultural neuroscience is so illuminating (and UCL has a great Neuroscience department!). For example, different cultures process faces differently – as do illiterate, semi literate and literate people. I am currently involved in an exciting project on distributed cognition led by Doug Cairns at Edinburgh University and am also editing the Routledge *Handbook of Cognitive Classics* which is a huge volume – again, I must be crazy!

**What do you like most about your current job?**
I love being involved with Classics. I think my first visit to Greece made me want to study Classics – there is something about that landscape with the sky, sea and islands which is very mythical and powerful. Greece is sometimes a chaotic place but, out of chaos, comes creativity. I am off to Greece again tomorrow!
What was your first-ever job?
I worked on a building site as a labourer which earned me money and I also got fit enough to join the marines. It was very hard work – I was exhausted by 10 a.m. every day!

What has been your favourite job?
I love teaching and come from a family of teachers. I do believe that teaching is a calling and that teaching informs research (rather than the other way round). I think it is very creative and I often find that new ideas strike me when I am teaching.

What do you remember most about your time in UCL Greek and Latin?
I remember the great social life with our huge Classical Society and making very good friends. There was a massive buzz which I guess also partly came from being based in central London. I loved every single day of it.

Who at UCL (past or present) has most influenced you?
Pat Easterling, who encouraged me to study the soldier and poet, Aeschylus, and Alan Griffiths who founded the Ancient World degree. I would also like to mention Malcolm Wilcox, who was the very quiet but influential Chair of Latin.

Of what are you most proud about UCL?
I am really proud that the Greek Play is still going strong! I am very proud of UCL traditions and the Benthamite philosophy and I hope that one or both of my daughters may also want to study at UCL.

What is your favourite part of UCL?
I love the Quad and Gordon Square gardens. I also fondly remember Anemos, a Greek restaurant in Charlotte Street. Members of the Classical Society used to dress up and follow Dionysus, behind a phallic symbol, to that particular restaurant!

I also really enjoyed going to stay at Cumberland Lodge in the beautiful Great Park at Windsor.

Tell me something about yourself that most people don’t know!
I am a firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician. All firefighters outside New York are volunteers but are trained by professional New York Fire instructors and chiefs. In my little town in Westchester we usually only experience about four or five real fires every year so we are mainly dealing with car accidents, hazardous conditions, rescuing people and medical calls. I manage to do a lot of writing at the fire station on a 12-hour shift! Actually, I think it is healthy to challenge yourself and
to become a rookie later on in life, when you have to learn something new from scratch. It is quite difficult to make friends in the US and another bonus is forming the type of camaraderie amongst firefighters which you also experience in the military.

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