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## Jay W. Jensen, 75, taught the stars

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Known as "Teacher to the Stars" because he churned out so many entertainment industry success stories, Jay W. Jensen's most enduring legacy may be the legions of students he inspired to excel and who, well into their varied careers, kept in touch with the iconic former drama director of Miami Beach Senior High School.

Jensen, a formidable figure in the educational, philanthropic and cultural aspects of South Florida for nearly five decades, died late Saturday after a long battle with prostate cancer that left his body weakened but never broke his spirit. He was 75.

Jensen protégé and film director Brett Ratner, whose screen credits include the Rush Hour trilogy (1998-2007), Red Dragon (2002) and X-Men: The Last Stand (2006), flew to Miami from Paris in October to be at his mentor's side.

"Jay was so inspiring because he taught me more about life than he did about drama class," said Ratner, 37, who now lives in Beverly Hills. ``Every day was an exciting new adventure in his class. I never knew what I was going to learn.

"I think the most important thing I learned from Jay was passion," said Ratner, a 1986 graduate of Miami Beach High. ``And his passion for teaching set an example for all his students. Jay made me realize what life was all about, which is to love what you do."

Last year, a film inspired by Jensen made its debut at the Miami International Film Festival. *Class Act* was made by two former students of Jensens, Sara Sackner (Class of '76) and Heather Winters (Class of '80), who were inspired to make the film after attending a 2003 reunion of several dozen former Jensen students now based in California, where many of them work in the entertainment industry.

Jensen's lessons carried beyond the stage, as he was an inspiration not only in the lives and careers of actors, singers, directors and producers, but also of sports announcers, lawyers, doctors, teachers and other professionals.

The film includes interviews with many of Jensen's former students, including actor Andy Garcia, sportscaster Roy Firestone, Univision Music Group President Jose Behar and Broadway producer Adam Epstein.

Winters told The Miami Herald last year that after attending reunions of Jensen's Thespian Troupe 391 in California, she and Sackner were awed by his influence. "Why would hundreds of people come out to see their high school teacher," Winters told the Miami Herald. ``What was it that was so special? Why are people still in touch with him?"

Epstein, one of the producers of *Hairspray* on Broadway, thinks what made Jensen unusually effective was that he was part teacher, part colleague.

"He had all the enthusiasm of a 16-year-old kid but all the wisdom of a sage," Epstein said.

Part of Jensen's enduring attraction was the confidence he inspired in students while a teacher at Miami Beach High.

Profiled in the Miami Herald's Tropical Life section in September 2004, Jensen recalled that, ``I tried to be not just a teacher but a friend. . . . They could come to me and feel secure in speaking to me about their personal problems -- whether they were straight or gay, whether they should go to college, whether they had problems at home and family. I didn't pass judgment on them. I helped them the best I could."

As drama director, Jensen's policy toward his students was "everyone gets a chance," whether it was on stage or behind the scenes directing, designing the sets or even as ushers.

"No one was ever rejected," he said. `` I could always find a part even if I had to write them in. But they got something to do."

In many ways, Jensen succeeded at teaching drama was because he had tried to make it as an actor himself. Born in Irvington, N.J. on Aug. 4, 1931, his entertainment career began as the dance partner of his college classmate, the actress Carroll Baker, and the pair often performed for U.S. troops at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Though Jensen's ambition was to act in films, he changed course after an unsuccessful attempt to make it in Hollywood.

In 1957, Jensen, his mom and the family cat Dracula moved to Los Angeles, where producer Joe Pasternak had promised Jensen a role in his latest film.

But when Jensen arrived at Pasternak's offices, the producer was cleaning out his desk, Jensen recalled. TV was going to replace Hollywood films, the thinking went, and Pasternak was getting out.

There went Jensen's dream.

He returned to South Florida to teach and moonlighted as business administrator for Zev Bufman Entertainment, which produced theater at the Coconut Grove Playhouse.

Jensen cultivated friendships among Miami's celebrity circles and befriended many visiting stars, often bringing them to speak to his students. His famous friendships included a lifelong bond with playwright Tennessee Williams after the two met at the old Robert Clay Hotel on Miami Beach.

Jensen also had a flair for the theatrical, both at work, where his Miami Beach High stage productions sometimes riled sensibilities with controversial plays such as *The Serpent*, *The Impossible Years* and *Viet Rock*, and in his personal life, when in the late 1970s -- as Anita Bryant led a campaign against gay rights in Miami-Dade County -- Jensen got engaged to, though never married, a transsexual dancer named Jennifer Fox.

Though he never made it as an actor, Jensen said he didn't regret his career as a teacher.

"I'm very happy that I did it," he told *The Herald* in 2004, `` because I touched so many lives and I hope that in my own way I inspired them, which I suppose I did or they wouldn't be in contact like they are."

After retiring from Miami Beach High in 1991, Jensen continued to make his mark with volunteer work and philanthropic gifts, most notably an estimated \$3 million in bequests to the University of Miami, his alma mater.

"He was to the end a teacher," university President Donna Shalala said. `` He leaves us with a smile on our faces."

Jensen's name, and those of his parents, John W. and Thelma "Billie" Jensen, are enshrined in the lobby of the Jerry Herman Ring Theater, the pre-Columbian wing of the Lowe Art Museum and the administrative offices of the UM School of Education.

The gifts are remarkable because Jensen never earned more than \$47,000 a year as a public school teacher. Yet he amassed a small fortune through modest living and shrewd investment.

Jensen never learned to drive and, for more than 20 years, lived in a small apartment on Lincoln Road before moving to Coral Gables a few years ago.

For years, Jensen was drama director at Temple Beth Shalom and taught Judaism through drama at Temple Emanu-El in Miami Beach. He also established the Miami Beach Community Theater and the Miami Beach Children's Theater, both now defunct.

He taught twice-weekly drama classes at the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Miami Beach from 1991 until late last year, and taught drama to children at the Miami Beach Jewish Community Center.

Jensen also was a public speaker on topics ranging from diversity to `` The Other Side of Tennessee Williams."

Jensen also was an active member of the Concert Association of Florida and served on the boards of several other organizations, including the education committee of the Bass Museum of Art, the board of trustees of the Hope Center for the developmentally disabled, and the foundation of the Peterson Schools of Mexico City.

He was preceded in death by his mother, Thelma "Billie" Jensen, in 1999.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be sent to music, drama and education scholarships in Jensen's name at the University of Miami, Office of Estate and Gift Planning, P.O. Box 248073, Coral Gables, FL 33124.

Memorial services are pending, including one at the Jerry Herman Ring Theatre on the university campus.