



Leon Setti

September 12, 1935 - November 4, 2019

Obituary

Leon Augustus Setti, dancer, actor, auto mechanic, teacher, and architect died

November 4, 2019, at the home of his life companion, Megan Schirle, in Berkeley, CA.

She was at his side as he made this last part of his journey. Leon was 84 years old. He

is survived by first cousins Anna Donovan of Arlington, MA, Maria Serpentino of

Needham, MA, and numerous extended family members and friends both in MA and

CA.

Leon was born September 12, 1935, the only child of Napoleon and Elsa (Palladino)

Setti, in Watertown, MA. Napoleon was a stained glass artist (renowned in his later

years) and Elsa, an artist and jewelry maker. The family spent every summer in

Rockport, MA, beginning in 1940, becoming part of the burgeoning art scene of that

time. Leon credited their artistry and somewhat bohemian lifestyle for his passion for the

arts, culture, politics, the creative process, and all forms of craft. He attended Watertown

High School, graduating Philips Academy at Andover, 1953, after accepting a

scholarship to attend his senior year. He graduated Harvard in 1957 with an A.B. in

Architectural Sciences, then attended Harvard Graduate School of Design in

Architecture.

Throughout a nearly 50 year architectural career on both coasts, Leon worked in almost

every capacity: design concept, rendering and construction documents; project

management; investigation, research and remediation of design/material failures;

teaching and project critique. He specialized in large scale projects with a diversity of

clients, including Housing and Urban Development, Disney World, Lawrence Livermore

Labs, and numerous medical and university facilities. He was most proud of his work

with Ron Mace in developing architectural accessibility standards, and designing

beautiful, accessible, community spaces and housing. He most enjoyed solving design

problems, and much of his later work involved rescuing or finishing stalled projects.

Leon, with all his technical skills, believed that architecture needed to be an embodied

art as well; his curriculum for design courses always began with a series of body/mind/

environment “experiments” in the making of shapes and forms. Thinking that he was

one of the last hand drafters, Leon lamented the generation that learned and practiced

only on CAD, having little or no visceral connection to the tools of the trade, or how to

design life into human-made structures.

Leon often referred to architecture as the “sideshow” to his passion for cars, theater,

and dance. His passion for cars began with models as a kid, then progressed to tearing

apart and rebuilding a 1934 Ford coupe at 17; training in the repair of Citroens as well

as in high-end and exotic cars; working at the Co-op Garage in Cambridge in the 1970s

(where he was, reportedly, the only one who loved cars); and owning and repairing his

MG, Triumph motorcycle and a series of 280 Zs. Leon and Megan enjoyed attending car

shows and rallies, often with their buddies of Golden State Rods. Leon spent countless

hours designing an accessible vehicle for Megan using the body of a 1953 TravelAll and

the drive train of a 1971 El Dorado.

Leon's theater resume was as long as his one for architecture. He played many of

Shakespeare's memorable characters, including Dogberry, Polonius and Toby Belch, to

name a few. He loved Samuel Beckett, performing as Krapp in "Krapp's Last Tape",

Willie in "Happy Days", and Words in "Words and Music". While he was comfortable in

plays by Aristophanes, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde, he relished most

playing Father Mark in the dinner theater show, "Tony n' Tina's Wedding", for several

years in San Francisco. Leon was most at home combining all his skills - as director, set

designer/creator, stage choreographer and actor - as seen in his three stage plays of

classic Twilight Zone episodes, performed in San Francisco, 2006-2011. Each was a

perfect gem of eerie, elegant, retro camp.

Leon discovered dance in the early 1960s, taking classes in ballet and modern dance at

the Boston and New England Conservatories before his usual workday. In 1967 he

appeared onstage behind Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev in Britain's Royal Ballet,

"Romeo and Juliet," in Boston. Nearly 40 years later, Leon sang back-up to Carol

Channing in a chorus line of dancing Santas for a San Francisco AIDS benefit. He

studied and performed with Liz Lerman, Remy Charlip, Steve Paxton, Rosie the

Radiator and many others. He met Megan in 1996 as a guest artist in an AXIS Dance

Company performance. "I felt an immediate connection with him when he saved me

from being dragged off stage in the dark; we turned it into a graceful, log-rolling dance

that no one would see. We shared a deep belief that any movement done with intention

could be a dance. And thus our life together began." Leon always ended his dance and

theater bios with “Leon will dance for anyone who asks him.” He remained true to his

word until the end, sharing small dances with Megan every day.

Leon was a voracious reader; his worldview was expansive, his ideas and stories

imbued with wit and compassion. He was generous to a fault, and during the many

years he worked in San Francisco, he quietly supported homeless ‘friends’ he came to

know. Family and friends loved receiving his thoughtful gifts and homemade cards, with

his uniquely styled wrapping. During any family gathering, Leon could often be found on

the floor, playing with the kids. Somewhat of a self-acknowledged “puer aeternus”, even

if only for his youthful exuberance and eternal curiosity, Leon did not fully achieved what

he thought would occur naturally - marriage, children, grandchildren, satisfying

domesticity. Yet he adopted and created family wherever he settled. Leon was brilliant,

funny, sensitive, complicated, and a huge, generous soul of a man. He loved deeply,

and is deeply loved and missed by us all.

To send flowers to the family or plant a tree in memory of Leon Setti, please visit our floral store.

Tribute Wall



“ I knew Leon in Cambridge when he was starting out as an architect and still searching for himself. Reading this obituary I'm so glad he found much of what he was looking for.

Jenny Kastner (Womack) - December 04, 2023 at 03:27 PM