

# UC Irvine

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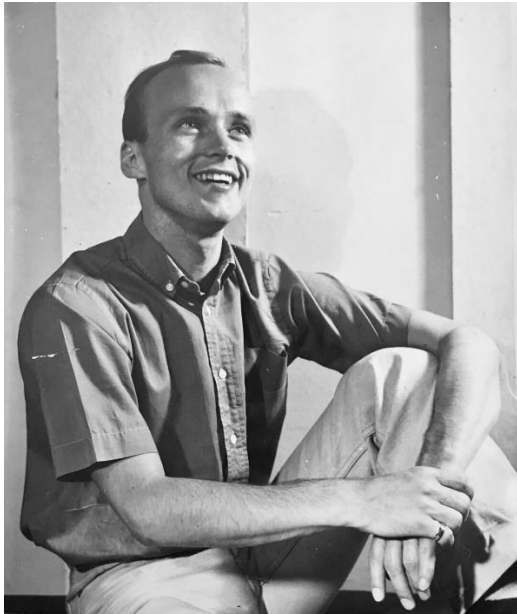
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Undergraduate

## Remembering James Wilford Penrod, the dance major's dream department chair



What do dancers do when they retire? Sometimes, they continue to make a significant contribution to the field if they are like James Penrod, who was lost to us on July 20, 2019, at age 84. A dancer/choreographer-turned-professor, Penrod retired from formal work in the 1990s, but he kept getting “recalled” to fill in as the exemplary Dance Department chair he was. And he never stopped dancing.

Born and raised in Provo, Utah, Penrod started like a lot of us—as a dancer in musicals and eventually in his own modern dance company. Then, he found other ways to make dance matter, to a great many people. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, at a gathering to celebrate his life on the campus of his beloved University of California Irvine, his wife Rita Marks Penrod was surrounded by appreciative friends, former students, and colleagues. We also heard about Penrod’s “last act,” when, in the new millennium, he finally left university teaching and administration. He and Rita traveled a lot and took ballroom dance, and also acting classes, becoming favorites in the scene studies they presented to the group. He was remembered with great warmth and affection by all.

As a founding member of the UC Irvine Dance Department in 1966, hired by founder Eugene Loring, Penrod at first taught dance on the stage of a gymnasium, sometimes during basketball practice before actual studios were built. Over four decades, he choreographed often for faculty concerts, taught Laban Movement Analysis, mentored generations of students, and published *Movement for the Performing Artist*, and, with longtime collaborator Janice Gudde Plastino, *The Dancer Prepares*. In addition to being Dance Department chair more than once, he served as an associate dean in the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, becoming a model for future

administrators because of his combination of geniality, diplomacy, efficiency, and advocacy for dance.

In photographs from many eras, Penrod looked boyish and handsome, remembered by all as a kind person, who also had a strong resolve to get things done. Fellow UCI professor Nancy Ruyter recalled Penrod's vision of a creatively diverse dance department, as he encouraged and facilitated the inclusion of Spanish and Indian classical dance, presaging today's emphasis on expansion of university dance department offerings. Plastino listed just a few of the dance world professionals Penrod invited to guest teach, hosting visits by Antony Tudor, Edward Villella, Paul Taylor, Arthur Mitchell, Merce Cunningham, and Gregory Hines.

Highlighting Penrod's mentoring skills was Trisha Hanada-Rogers, MFA Dance alumna and Professor of Dance at MiraCosta College, who said he had "a gift for planting a seed in students and helping them find their direction to grow."

As a professor emeritus, Penrod spearheaded a project to document the history of the UC Irvine Dance Department. With almost twenty oral-history interviews completed, the James Penrod Memorial & Legacy Project will show how one successful university dance department evolved. It seems a fitting tribute to honor those, like Penrod, who have been so important in establishing dance in the academy and inspiring artists through several generations.

Contributions to the James Penrod Memorial & Legacy Project can be made on [GoFundMe.com](https://www.gofundme.com).

