



## Carl Djerassi Fostered Arts and Literature at UW–Madison

March 12, 2015

Contributors: Jesse Kercheval, Sheila Leary, Heather Owens, Norma Saldivar, and Ronald Wallace

On January 30, 2015, world-renowned scientist and writer Carl Djerassi (b. October 29, 1923 in Vienna, Austria) died at the age of 91. [Dr. Djerassi](#) is best known for his work in chemistry, including developing the oral contraceptive pill, but he is also well known in arts circles for his fiction, plays, and philanthropic endeavors.



Dr. Djerassi had strong connections to the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He completed his PhD in chemistry at UW–Madison (1945) in only two years at the age of 22. He also received a University Honorary Degree in 1995, and he was the recipient for the [Wisconsin Alumni Association’s Distinguished Alumni Award](#) in 2012. Although he spent his own teaching career as a professor of chemistry at Stanford University, he supported various UW–Madison departments, staff, and faculty both financially and academically.

In the mid-1980s, he began to write creatively, experimenting over several decades with genres he called “science-in-fiction” and “[science-in-theatre](#).” He published more than two-dozen books of fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, and drama. Many of his works explored questions of ethics, philosophy, gender, and sexuality. [The University of Wisconsin Press](#) published and/or distributed four of his works: *[Sex in the Age of Technological Reproduction](#)* (2008); *[Foreplay: Hannah Arendt, the Two Adornos, and Walter Benjamin](#)* (2011); *[A Diary of Pique](#)* (2012); and *[How I Beat Coca-Cola and Other Tales of One-Upmanship](#)* (2013).

As a philanthropist, Djerassi’s contributions to the campus in general, and to the English Department’s Creative Writing Program in particular, are very significant. In 1997, he began funding two fellowships in the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writings’ post-MFA fellowship program on an annual basis, one in his own name and one named for his wife, poet and scholar Diane Middlebrook. Thirty-four writers—seventeen Carl Djerassi Fiction Fellows and seventeen Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellows—have benefited from his generosity. While resident on campus for a year, fellows work on their first books and teach in the undergraduate writing program. The fellows have gone on to distinguished careers as published writers and writing teachers. In 2007, Dr. Djerassi also

established the Carl Djerassi Fellowship in Playwriting, which has supported both established and aspiring playwrights in residence on campus. It is through his generosity that the Creative Writing Program has flourished.

“Besides his impact on the Creative Writing Program, he contributed personally and directly to the creative and intellectual life of UW–Madison faculty and students over the years. On his periodic and always high-powered visits to campus he met with writers; read from his own poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction; and oversaw performances and staged readings of his plays; activities that left everyone buzzing for days after his visits.

No one else so seamlessly combined the roles of scientist, historian, art collector, philosopher, musicologist, philanthropist, poet, novelist, memoirist, and playwright as Carl Djerassi. On his most recent visit to campus in 2012, he read from his new book of poems entitled *A Diary of Pique*, about his sometimes tempestuous relationship with the love of his life, Diane Middlebrook, and he oversaw the staged reading of his wonderfully entertaining and intellectually challenging play, *Insufficiency*.”

—Ronald Wallace | Co-Director of the Program in Creative Writing | Professor in English Department

In the mid-1990s, Djerassi started to focus on writing plays, especially in the genre of “science-in-theatre.” His first play, *An Immaculate Misconception*, premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1998 and was performed around the world and translated into 12 languages. The book version of the play was published in four languages. Some of his other STEM-inspired plays include *Oxygen*, (2001, co-written by Roald Hoffmann, Nobel Laureate), *Calculus* (premiered 2003), and *Taboos* (2006). He also wrote plays about the art world including *Ego/Three on a Couch* (premiered 2003/2004), *Phallacy* (2005) and *Four Jews on Parnassus* (2006)—inspired by Paul Klee’s works. Performed on stages around the world, his works have also been broadcast by the British Broadcasting Company, National Public Radio, and West German Radio.



Besides his creative writing support at UW-Madison, the community benefited from productions and readings of his works on campus. Norma Saldivar, Executive Director of the Arts Institute and professor in the Department of Theatre and Drama, directed *Oxygen* in the spring of 2003. The production was recorded by Wisconsin Public Television under the direction of Deb Piper and released by the Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy (WISL). The DVD and supplemental educational materials have been a learning tool for educational organizations around the world as a way to tell the story of who might have discovered oxygen through a series of flashbacks of 18<sup>th</sup>-century scientists—Joseph

Priestly, Antoine Lavoisier, and Karl Wilhelm Scheele.

In conjunction with the play being performed, WISL and numerous campus partners organized a [symposium](#) on the subject of oxygen in March 2003. Djerassi and Hoffmann were the keynote presenters at the symposium. The symposium also included lectures from UW professors, demonstrations from [Bassam Shkhashiri](#) (WISL Director and UW Professor of Chemistry), and a musical performance of Mozart (a contemporary of the discoverers of oxygen) by Marc Fink and members of the Pro Arte Quartet. Djerassi also read *Four Jews on Parnassus* on campus and was able to attend the staged reading of *Foreplay* directed by Patrick Sims in [March 2011](#) as part of the Year of the Arts celebration in 2010-2011. He was also on campus for readings of *Insufficiency* and *A Diary of Pique* (referenced above).

“I hold Carl Djerassi as one of my dearest collaborators and mentors. Aside from being an extraordinary and rarified person, he was a prime example of a true Renaissance man. He provided a great example of a person fully engaged in the world—curious and open to new experiences. We became acquainted and had a professional relationship through his passion for theatre—which was ever changing. He understood the power of the arts and especially theatre to illuminate and affect an audience—and he really found this to be a great tool to share his love and curiosity that brought him to science—chemistry. I am grateful for his friendship and appreciative of how he brought me to meet and work with colleagues across the campus. I am forever changed.”

— Norma Saldivar | Executive Director of the Arts Institute | Professor in Drama and Theatre

Norma Saldivar and Bassam Shkhashiri saw productions of Djerassi’s plays *Ego* (2003) and *Insufficiency* (2012) at Z Below in San Francisco in the fall of 2014. *Ego* portrays a famous writer who fakes his own death to see what is written about him in the obituaries. *Insufficiency* depicts a professor trying to obtain tenure while working on the science of “bubbleology.” During their visit to San Francisco, Saldivar and Shkhashiri were able to visit their good friend and mentor.

Djerassi’s impact and legacy will continue on. The UW–Madison community is grateful for all that he has produced and for his philanthropy. For more information on Dr. Carl Djerassi, please visit: [www.djerassi.com](http://www.djerassi.com). A Celebration of Life event was held in his honor on March 7, 2015 in Woodside, California.