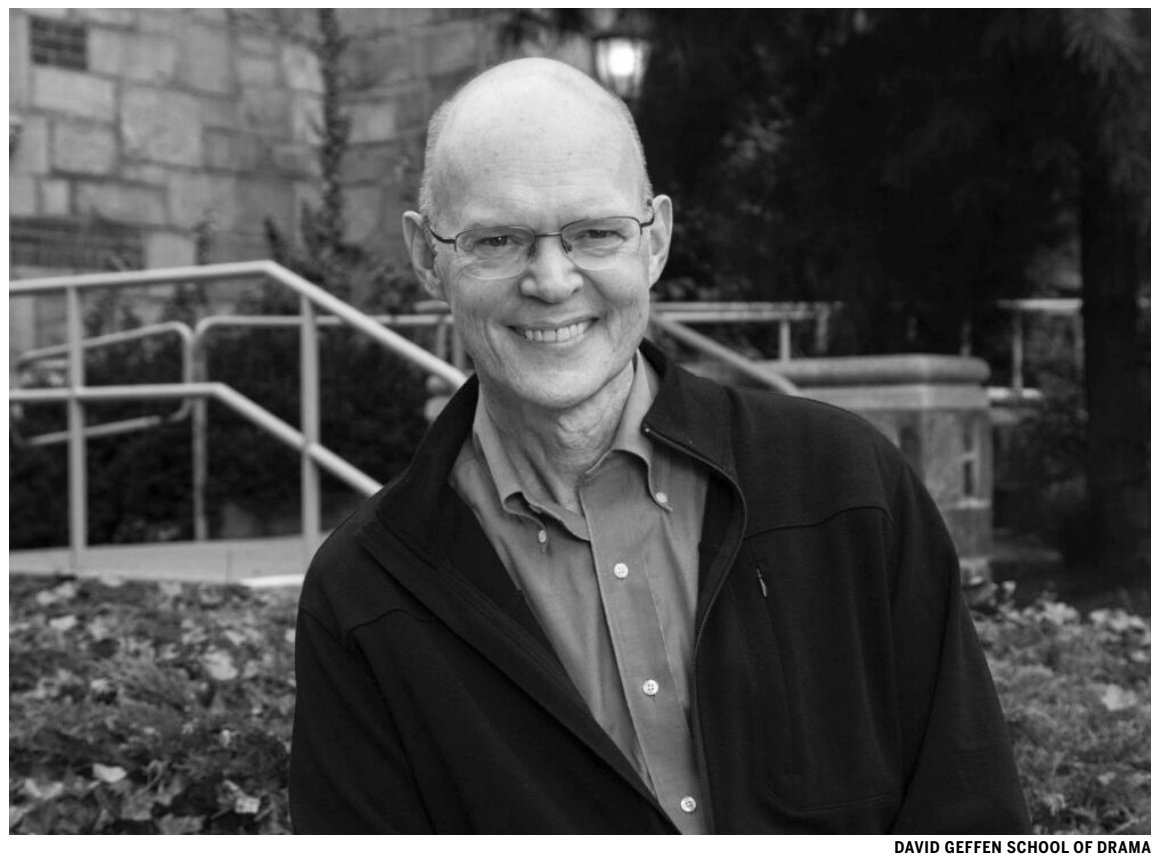
ARTS

"Any definition of a successful life must include service to others."
GEORGE H. W. BUSH '48 41ST U.S. PRESIDENT

Under Bundy, drama school went tuition-free and saw a cultural shift

BY KIVA BANK
STAFF REPORTER



DAVID GEFFEN SCHOOL OF DRAMA

James Bundy DRA '95, the longest-serving dean of the David Geffen School of Drama, oversaw the historic change to the school's financial aid policy that eliminated tuition costs. Bundy's colleagues described his leadership as "remarkable."

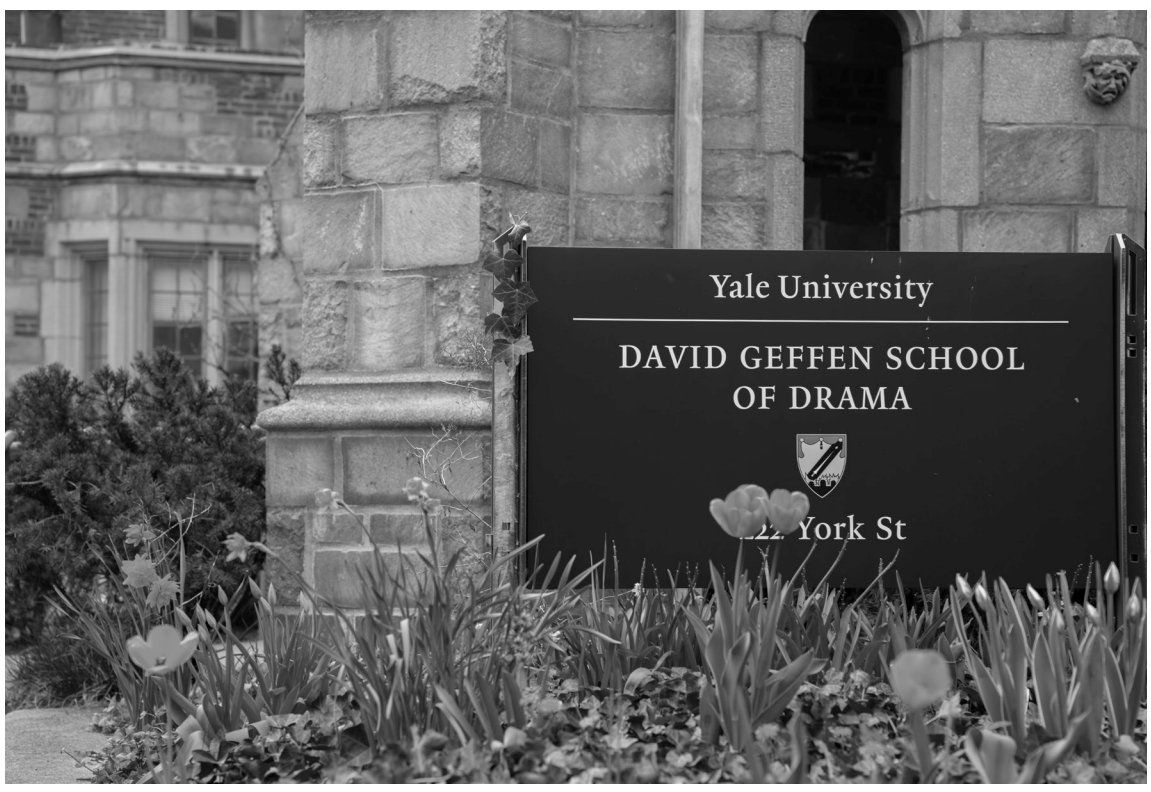
The office of James Bundy DRA '95, who is retiring from his posts at the David Geffen School of Drama and the Yale Repertory Theatre, is set to be cleared out by the end of June.

But for now, the room's blue walls are still covered with framed posters from student thesis productions Bundy has seen throughout his 24-year-long tenure — the longest of any Drama School dean to date.

"The theater is filled with mementos," Bundy, who has served in his role as dean and as the Yale Rep's artistic director since 2002, said in an interview with the News. His office is laden with keepsakes, each object hinting at a piece of his life and work at Yale. Beneath his coffee table sits a "Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary," a nod to the "Acting Shakespeare" undergraduate course he will continue to teach after stepping down this summer.

Nearby is a gold-painted leg signed by an Estonian clown who performed at the Yale Rep this past season, and on Bundy's desk sits a Funko Pop gifted to him by Nancy Yao, the assistant dean of student life at the drama school. The figurine is styled in his likeness — bald, wearing clear-framed glasses — and the diploma it holds echoes Bundy himself, who earned his MFA in directing from the School of Drama in 1995.

"The school completely changed the direction of my career, and opened up a world of opportunities," he said. Prior to his appointment to the Drama School, Bundy served as the artistic director of Great Lakes Theater Festival, as well as the associate producing director of the Acting Company in New York City and as managing director of Cornerstone Theater Company.



ELLIE PARK / SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHER

Posters for two different student productions of "Hedda Gabler" — the last play that Bundy himself directed at the Yale Rep while serving as its artistic director — hang in his office. During his tenure at the Rep, he also directed productions of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "All's Well That Ends Well."

Liz Diamond, the chair of the directing program at the David Geffen School of Drama, told the News she is "a little bit in denial" about the change in leadership at the school. She said was glad to see Bundy "pour his heart and soul" into the Yale Rep's production of "Hedda Gabler."

"I was really moved by the work," she said in a phone interview with the News. "I'm sure that was partly because I knew it was his last production as dean and artistic director."

Diamond said she first met Bundy in fall 1992, when he was one of four students in her directing seminar.

She described him as "surpassingly conscientious," an "indefatigable researcher" and a "wonderful thinker."

Catherine Sheehy DRA '92 '99, who is currently the chair of dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Drama School and a dramaturg at the Yale Rep, was a first-year faculty member when Bundy was in his final year as a student. She said she can still recall his 1995 thesis production of "Three Sisters."

"He created these images that were really strong," Sheehy said. "I can still see Protopopov in his white suit, sitting and smoking."

She said that Bundy's training as an actor enabled him to understand players better as a director, and that in her mind, "he was always sort of an old soul."

Sheehy recalled that Bundy balanced his studies at the drama school with his responsibilities as a husband and a young father.

"I remember him wheeling around his kids at the time," she said.

Bundy said that his time as a student at the Drama School aided him when he took his place at its helm, helping inform his understanding of the school's potential.

When he stepped into the deanship, Bundy said that both the search committee that had appointed him and then-University president Richard Levin '72 '74 were clear in communicating their priorities for the school. He said there was a general agreement to rank financial aid as the top priority, followed by faculty compensation and new facilities.

"24 years later, we still haven't broken ground on that building, but we're close," Bundy joked, referring to the Dramatic Arts building set to be completed in 2029.

The seven-floor structure will house the Yale Repertory Theater, the David Geffen School of Drama and the undergraduate Theater, Dance and Performance Studies department in one space.

"James willed this building into being," Sheehy said. "James has had to have extraordinary persistence. The administration has changed. The president has changed, the provost has changed more than once."

At the same time, Bundy has been driven by his desire to decrease student indebtedness, which he said was a major problem when he first began his tenure.

According to Bundy, debt for School of Drama students in 1982 averaged $10,000, or roughly $34,000 in today's dollars, and the average debt for the class of 2005 was around $45,000, or $75,000 today. The average student today graduates from the school with about $16,000 in debt — around a 50 percent net reduction from 1982 and an 80 percent net reduction from 2005.

Sheehy said that when she graduated from the drama school in 1992, her student loan payment was $575 per month, which she characterized as "enormous."

She said that the financial aid program did not offer much grant aid at the time, but that when Bundy arrived as dean, he immediately started working to increase financial aid.

Diamond said that the first full faculty meeting under Bundy's leadership marked a change from the previous dean's style.

"We really didn't have very lively faculty meetings under the previous dean," Diamond said, but under Bundy, "we began with a physical warm-up led by the acting teacher who taught movement."

"For the first time in history, faculty and staff of the drama school were jumping up and down together and sweating," Diamond said.

She said that when Bundy led a discussion to determine the school's priorities during the first five years of his tenure, the desire to increase financial aid for students was unanimous amongst faculty.

"He pursued that goal assiduously, and it took the better part of nearly 20 years," Diamond said. She described Bundy's skills as those of "remarkable systems analyst," which enabled him to establish a plan to go tuition-free.

In 2021, nearly twenty years into Bundy's deanship, entertainment mogul David Geffen donated $150 million to the Drama School. The gift allowed the school to become tuition-free for all full-time students in perpetuity, and the school was renamed in Geffen's honor.

Before the donation, Bundy oversaw a need-based student aid program, according to Sheehy, and also played a key role in establishing 70 of the school's 91 named scholarships.

In 2008, Bundy helped facilitate funding for living stipends and summer support for playwriting students through a bequest from playwright Eugene O'Neill and Carlotta Monterey, which he said made Yale's playwriting program competitive with other fully-funded MFA programs. As a result, all students in the playwriting program — of which there are three per year — receive stipends to cover their living expenses during both the academic year and summer months, in addition to full-tuition scholarships.

Chantal Rodriguez, associate dean of the Drama School, said in a phone interview with the News that Bundy's dedication "to decreasing the overall indebtedness of alumni" has formed part of his legacy.

During the first year of the pandemic, the Drama School saved roughly $3 million in production costs because it did not put on any plays. The school then used the excess funds toward tuition and living stipends to offer a fourth year for students in the classes of 2021, 2022 and 2023 free of charge, Bundy said.

Diamond also praised Bundy for his dedication to establishing a shared leadership model among the associate and assistant deans, which promotes collective decision-making.

"You cannot make theater if you are a person who insists on flying solo," Diamond said. "It's a form of practicing for civilization, and I think that the fact that James, in his own practice as a leader of our school and theater, strove to lead collaboratively, was remarkable."

Bundy also brought about a cultural shift at the school, according to Sheehy.

For years, the acting program followed a longstanding tradition of admitting 10 men and six women each year, based on the belief that classical repertory, particularly Shakespeare, required more male actors, Sheehy said. But students argued that the policy was both discriminatory and no longer beneficial to their training, and Bundy removed the quota.

Evan Yionoulis '82 DRA '85 was recently announced as Bundy's successor. The outgoing dean characterized Yionoulis as his former mentor, as he worked as her teaching assistant during the summers of 1993 and 1995 when she taught acting for a Yale program.

Yionoulis, who previously served as the chair of acting at the drama school, also served on the search committee when Bundy was hired, he said.

"She asked me, to the effect of, 'How would you want people to describe your leadership style?'" he said, recalling the time when Yionoulis was involved in his selection. "I said that I would want to lead with my heart."

Diamond said Bundy is known to read the application of every single incoming student as well as memorize their names and proper pronunciation before orientation. As of last fall, the school enrolled 240 students, according to the Office of Institutional Research.

"That is just an example of his deep commitment to this community, and it makes everybody step up," Diamond said.

Bundy also hosts an annual barbecue in the backyard of his house in Westville, a tradition he said started when he moved into the home with his family around the time his deanship began. He said he recalled thinking, "Oh, the whole school could fit in this backyard."

"It's a nice way for people to be together at the outset," he said. "We've had 10,000 guests at our house over the course of the decades, and that's felt like a really meaningful experience."

In April, Diamond said, the school was able to return the favor and host a farewell party in celebration of Bundy with all students, faculty and staff.

"There were a gazillion balloons that were shaped like hearts, which has extra meaning for a dean who had at least two open heart surgeries during his tenure," she said.

Sheehy said that Bundy's "open-heartedness" and "open door" policy as a dean will be hardest to replace.

"I always think that it's a sign of good character if you're willing to be a fool for love," Sheehy said. "James is willing to be a fool for his love of this institution, and he's willing to be humble in that way and enjoy a joke and see the funny side."

Bundy graduated from Harvard College in 1981.

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