

STEPHEN WATT

In one of his last great works, the Irish novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett writes, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Such a Beckettian ethos governed the career of Provost Professor of English Stephen Watt—a career filled with institutional and intellectual risks that have left a meaningful and lasting legacy in the English department, the College of Arts and Sciences, and academia at large. In a profession where failures are tallied daily and successes rare, Steve was a master of the long game. His passionate teaching and mentorship have guided several new generations of top-notch scholars and researchers. His groundbreaking research has shaped the course of multiple areas of literary and cultural studies. His administrative vision has led the development of impactful new policies and entire schools that will sustain the future of Indiana University. But above all else, Steve leaves his mark at IU as a bridge-builder and model colleague.

Steve joined the English department at IU Bloomington in 1985 after receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign three years earlier. Among his many roles, he served as director of graduate studies and then chair of the English department (2001–06), guiding the department deftly through a number of major transitions. He then served in a variety of decanal positions in the College of Arts and Sciences: associate dean for strategic planning (2008–10); associate dean for undergraduate education (2010–12); and associate dean for strategic initiatives (2013–15), a position which included planning and development of the newly formed Media School and the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture & Design. In the latter capacity, he led the initiative to implement a new professional master’s degree in architecture. He has also served the university as the co-chair of the Bicentennial Steering Committee, chair of the University Committee on Centers and Institutes, and in many other posts. In service to the profession, he was elected president of the Midwest Modern Language Association in 1999 and to the editorial boards of journals such as the *Irish University Review* (University College Dublin), *Theatre Survey*, *The Harold Pinter Review*, and others. It would take a leader guided by a Beckettian



sensibility to succeed so profoundly at so many institutional transformations.

Writing in three main areas—Irish studies, drama and performance studies, and critical university studies—Steve has published over 100 articles, peer-reviewed chapters in anthologies, and reviews in scholarly journals. He has authored, co-authored, or edited 13 books, including the major monographs *Joyce, O’Casey, and the Popular Irish Theater* (1991); *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage* (1998); *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (2009); “*Something Dreadful and Grand*”: *American Literature and the Irish-Jewish Unconscious* (2015); and *Bernard Shaw’s Fiction, Material Psychology and Affect: Shaw, Freud, Simmel* (2018). With his collaborator, Cary Nelson of the University of Illinois, he co-authored two book-length studies of higher education: *Academic Keywords* (1999) and *Office Hours: Activism and Change in the Academy* (2004). His edited books range from topics such as nineteenth-century British and American theatre to Ian Fleming and the cultural politics of James Bond.

A select list of his national honors and awards includes research fellowships from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation at Brown University, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin; the 2010 Robert Rhodes Prize for Literature from the American Conference for Irish Studies (for his book on Samuel Beckett); and exemplary alumnus at the University of

Wyoming on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of their College of Arts and Sciences (1993). At IU, the list goes on, including the Thomas Hart Benton Medal for Outstanding Service (1993), the Tracy M. Sonneborn Lecturer (2011), the designation Provost Professor (2013), and the Henry R. Besch, Jr. Promotion of Excellence Award (2019).

Steve, however, ties his greatest accomplishments to the successes of his students and colleagues. He has been director, co-director, or member of the research committees of more than 60 doctoral candidates, including several who now hold positions at institutions such as Brown, Michigan State, University College Dublin, and the University of Tel Aviv. Many of his undergraduates have also gone on to produce excellent scholarship, including one who published a book with Indiana University Press in 2019. He remains exceptionally proud of the colleagues in whose recruitment to Indiana he played a part (the two of us among them), very many of whom today rank among the leaders of the English department, the College, and the university.

For many of us in English, Steve has been the heart and soul of the department, and just as often its voice of reason and institutional memory. He is a wonderful storyteller, his tales only slightly stretched (after the Irish manner) and delivered with wit and spot-on impressions (including voices that range from a high octave to a deep baritone and elastic facial expressions that uncannily conjure the players in the tale). His performances don’t stop there. He is a fabulous musician and bandmate, most notably on the keys, and few will forget his electrifying performances with the College’s Band of Deans. In Beckett’s most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon explains, “I either forget right away or I never forget.” In the English department and at IU, Steve and his successes will be long remembered.

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Shane Vogel