

Remembering a Dallas icon

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“Comedy Tonight” isn’t an ordinary song for a memorial service.

But the opening number from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* struck the right exuberant note for the celebration of Jac Alder, a man who was anything but ordinary, at a packed Dallas City Performance Hall on Monday.

Alder, an Oklahoma native who co-founded and ran Theatre Three, loved to laugh, noted Bruce R. Coleman, who stepped in as the company’s acting artistic director after Alder died on May 22 of respiratory failure. He was 80.

Coleman served as emcee in a song- and story-filled program that took the crowd on a journey through Alder’s life, narrated by those whose lives he’d touched. The first speaker, David Fisher, interim director of Dallas’ Office of Cultural Affairs, tossed in a joke that pointed to Alder’s fierce advocacy for the arts.

Alder had fought hard to get the city to include an orchestra pit when it built the 750-seat City Performance Hall, which opened in 2012. He wouldn’t back down even when opponents complained they couldn’t understand why he was pushing so hard for this pricey detail in a theater he’d never use.

Fisher gestured to the performers who had risen up through the orchestra pit to sing the opening song and the audience roared.

A coat rack draped with the colorful scarves that Alder wore as his signature accessory commanded center stage as a slide show of his years, taking him from childhood to recent times, ran continuously on a



Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor

Chris Westfall and Lisa-Gabrielle Greene sing “Soon It’s Gonna Rain” during Jac Alder’s remembrance celebration.

screen at the back.

Caley O’Dwyer Feagin, Alder’s godson, read his original poem “In the Cool House,” as requested in Alder’s will. The Cool House of the poem was Theatre Three, Feagin explained, referring to it as a “place of refuge, full of laughter, away from the madness of the world.”

It was the same poem his father read at the funeral of Alder’s wife, Norma Young, who died in 1998. Alder and Young founded the theater along with their friends Robert Dracup and Esther Ragland in April 1961.

Feagin talked about growing up in the green room of the

theater where his parents, actor Hugh Feagin and actress and playwright Camilla Carr, met.

“I have never been more surrounded by love than in my childhood in that theater,” he said. “What Jac and Norma cared about most were people. They saw theater as an honorable way to effect goodness in people.”

Old friends shared stories about the man who was serious about play and playful about serious things and was known for spotting and nurturing talent. He gave Highland Park High School’s Doug Wright and Southern Methodist University’s Beth Henley their first

professional acting jobs. Both later became Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights. Both sent in tributes that attested to how Alder’s faith and encouragement had helped them believe in themselves.

Dallas Summer Musicals President and Managing Director Michael A. Jenkins, who built sets for Theatre Three as a teen, quoted *Wicked* in talking about how he felt “changed for the better” by a friendship that deepened over the years.

The singers at the service were also longtime friends and performers at Theatre Three. Max Swarner, who twice performed in the company’s *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change* opposite his girlfriend, then fiancée, now wife, sang “Corner of the Sky” from *Pippin*, which he had starred in at Theatre Three in 2011.

The song is usually heard as an expression of a young man’s naivete about what he can accomplish. As Swarner sang it for Alder, followed by a small bow to the rack of scarves, then a finger pointed to the heavens, the meaning shifted. The young man who’d co-founded a theater 54 years ago had created a place where his spirit could “run free,” as the lyrics go. Challenging and caring for the people who walked through its doors, he’d lived an “extraordinary” life.

Before a final “Old Friends” singalong where people were asked to hold hands with those on either side of them, Coleman said the best way to continue Alder’s legacy was to support Theatre Three.

“Come to the theater. Come see a show. Buy a ticket. Buy four tickets. Be an usher. Audition. Come visit. Come be part of our family.”

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