UC SANTA BARBARA

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A Gift for the Ages

It would be fair to say that few men had as great a love of voices — especially those reciting Shakespeare — as Robert J. O'Brien. The scholar and author amassed a collection of more than 1,400 theatrical recordings of the Bard's works. Now, thanks to the generosity of his family, that collection has a home at the UC Santa Barbara Library.

Margaret O'Brien, his daughter, donated The Dr. Robert J. O'Brien Shakespeare Recording Collection to the library's Special Research Collections and established a legacy endowment, The Dr. Robert J. O'Brien Shakespeare Recording Fund, to promote the use and accessibility of the collection.

"My dad was passionate about preserving voices," Margaret O'Brien said. "Looking at a photo, my dad would say, 'We know what they look like, but what do they sound like?' "

O'Brien's passion developed when he was an undergraduate studying English at Louisiana State University in the late 1950s. He "discovered for the first time how delightfully amusing Shakespeare can be," his daughter said, while listening to a professor recite the Bard. He wrote articles on Shakespeare as a college student, most regarding the meter and formation of a verse.

He was so zealous about his studies that he went on to earn his Ph.D. and then taught at West Virginia Wesleyan College and the University of Maryland in Asia and Germany.

The time spent listening to Shakespeare turned into a consuming passion to collect recordings of his works. O'Brien's collection includes over 1,200 disc recordings — dating as far back as 1911 — and 200 CDs. Many of the recordings feature well-known actors such as Sir Ian McKellen, Christopher Plummer, Dame Judi Dench, John Gielgud and Dame Maggie Smith. There's even one with Andy Griffith performing a comic take on Hamlet. The collection also includes several recordings in Spanish, French, German and Hebrew.

As part of the library's offerings, Margaret O'Brien hopes the collection will allow aspiring actors and scholars to listen to and study the diction and meter performed by a variety of people in a variety of languages. Her father's goal, she said, was to provide as much history of a recording as possible and make the information available to everyone.

"Robert O'Brien's collection is unique because the discography is diverse and wide-ranging," said David Seubert, Performing Arts Collection curator. "It offers students and other scholars the opportunity to contrast performance styles across recordings and gain a deeper understanding of Shakespeare in all of its iterations. We are honored to house this impressive collection and accompanying endowment at the UC Santa Barbara Library."

O'Brien paid close attention to actors' delivery of iambic pentameter. In "The Player's Guide to Reading Shakespeare Aloud," he provides instruction for preserving iambic pentameter. O'Brien's own voice was preserved by StoryCorps in 2018 (requires registration).

"I am very thankful the UC Santa Barbara Library agreed to become the curators of his collection of Shakespeare recordings and papers. It is a culmination of one of his life's passions," Margaret O'Brien said. "The recording collection stands as a testament to the rich and very long oral history of Shakespeare."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we

draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.