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ARTS ON CAMPUS: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

Laura Gardner Salazar

The Arts on Campus festival began in the first spring of Grand Valley’s existence. In addition to musical events and art exhibits, the committee chose plays that would offer students experiences they had not had in high school and would develop a voice different from those found at other area colleges. There was, of course, no Theatre Department at the time, but there were theatre enthusiasts: Professors Lou Rus and Bob Chamberlain in English and Al Baker in Chemistry, the advisors of the drama club “Les Visages,” had produced short plays, Eugene Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano in 1964 and Gertrude Stein’s Brewsie and Willie in 1965. Grand Valley was a new school, but that did not mean that it had to think small or be conformist.

I came to Grand Rapids in 1964 with my husband Hugo, who had been hired to teach Spanish at GVSC. Through him the committee learned that I was a drama teacher and play director. In the spring of 1966 the committee chose to produce La Lena or The Bawd, an English language premiere of the sixteenth century Italian Ariosto’s comedy, a full-length play. They hired me to direct the play. Roberta Simone had translated the play as part of her dissertation, so the two of us collaborated on a production which emphasized the vitality and ribald humor of the Renaissance, resulting in a romp that raised a few eyebrows.

I was hired as a part-time teacher in the English Department and was to direct the play for the next year. The program that went to press before casting indicates that the play was Shaw’s Androcles and the Lion. When I held auditions, there were not enough male actors to fill the parts. We substituted three medieval morality plays—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the Flood—and filled in with faculty and staff members. The little theatre in Lake Huron Hall seemed well suited to staging these tiny dramas that were given modern dress and a contemporary twist. The Devil popped out of Hell’s mouth, and when Cain tried to light a fire to burn his sacrifice, a mushroom cloud of smoke arose. In a parade of the Seven Deadly Sins, Wrath appeared as a biker in leather and chains. One actress, decked out in silks and furs, complained backstage that she could not understand how her character, Pride, could possibly represent a sin.

The following year, the Arts on Campus play was Sheridan’s The Rivals. In addition, an Ann Arbor company brought a happening. Inspired by them as well as by articles I had been reading in the Tulane Drama Review, the theatre group tried its own hand at a happening, somehow or other using cooked oatmeal as a prop. The blue velour curtain was never the same. Grand Valley was ahead of its time. My mother came to see these productions, and we had a good argument about new theatre forms. Finally I asked her how my grandmother, the piano teacher, had taken to jazz. I won the argument.
Arts on Campus was a joyous outflowing of our youth and our pride in our new school. When an event concluded, the whole audience plunged into the pit of Seidman House to argue into the night about the writing, acting and staging. The long winter was over, and we were bursting intellectually and physically like the pear trees around us. The pioneer students were exceptionally talented and hard working and were willing risk takers. Over the years, they have made their mark in theatre locally and across the country. Surely they made their mark on Grand Valley as they set the tone for what was to come.

The enthusiasm that fed the faculty spilled over into two new projects. One was local, and the other had implications for all of Western Michigan. Grand Valley State College Friends of the Arts began in the spring of 1968. Its purposes were as follows:

1. to organize and sponsor scholarships, prizes, performances, concerts, exhibits, lectures, and art happenings of exceptional quality that will stimulate and interest the college audience;
2. to make these programs available to the greater Western Michigan Community and thereby achieve exposure to the arts;
3. to establish an Endowment for the Arts at Grand Valley State College;
4. to give financial support to young artists at the college, which will always assist and never dictate.

The bylaws added to point four: "The tradition of freedom in the arts is to be cherished and kept open as one of the last channels for truly creative thought."

Friends of the Arts supported dance, film, music, theatre, and the visual arts. A weekly series of films helped to carry the spirit of Arts on Campus throughout the year. The English Department sporadically organized group readings of plays and poems. In 1969, the Friends of the Arts sponsored the college actors in the American premier of Antonio Buerro Vallejo's *The Concert at Saint Ovid*.

Faculty members as well as administrators and "friends" from the community made up the membership. One of those "friends," Nancy Mulnix, had almost single-handedly brought the Calder stabile to Grand Rapids. She, along with Whitney Seven of the Art Department, whipped up the scheme to ask Calder to make a print of his stabile to donate to GVSC. The sale of the prints would be used for scholarships for arts students. Thus was born, in 1970, both the name of the fine arts building and the Alexander Calder Scholarship, which is still given annually to GVSU arts students. As academic programs and funds in the coffers grew, the Friends of the Arts dissolved. The Grand Valley State College Foundation took over fund raising for the arts, and departments took over the need for activities and formal study.

Not satisfied with what we could do only on our own campus, Margaret Crawford, a professor in the Art Department, and I took it upon ourselves to develop a project which we called "Culture in the Cornfields." We hoped it would help all of us cope with a sense of isolation from the artistic revolution going on throughout the country by inviting area college arts faculty to join us in cooperative ventures. As a result, we exchanged newsletters, calendars and performances. Michigan had just developed an Arts Council, so we hoped to follow suit from this initiative. The schedules made it out in 1970—my last—my last costs. We were not connected withConnecting people with knowledge through language.
our pride in our new fire and brimstone and staging. The thrust physically like the pear and hard working mark in theatre and Valley as they projects. One was Grand Valley State was as such:

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an Arts Council, so speakers came to the campus to help us understand and benefit from this initiative. Culture in the Cornfields flourished for two years. Individual schedules made it impossible to continue group work, yet answers to a survey I sent out in 1970—my last correspondence on this project—begged us to continue at all costs. We were not able to do that, but the short-lived organization did make connections with colleagues, which I still enjoy.

The flowering of Arts on Campus gave us all spirit and joy. It got the arts off to a strong start at Grand Valley. It must have convinced the administration and faculty to develop majors in the arts disciplines and to encourage more complexity and excellence in their projects. As I write this, we are in the middle of the 1995 Shakespeare Festival, and I wonder if it will have a comparable impact. Ask me back to write about it in 2020.