

## Blueprint for Success; Granting Space Instead of Money, Arlington Revolutionizes Arts Funding

[FINAL Edition]

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From the parking lot, Arlington's Gunston Arts Center looks like the '60s junior high it once was. Red bricks. Yellow panels. Low shrubs. Except for a small sign reading "I Hate Hamlet," there's no outward evidence that Northern Virginia's most vibrant performing arts complex is tucked away here on residential South Lang Street. Everything about this nondescript building, just down the hill from where Al and Tipper Gore lived before the election, seems unchanged from the days when it, and the far more prominent "BOWL" sign for the nearby Rinaldi lanes, were brand-new.

Nor does the time warp entirely evaporate inside. Photos of the Classes of '65, '66 and '67 line locker-crammed halls - smirking 12-year-olds with serious hair, preserved in all their adolescent glory. Yet Gunston also has a sleek modern lobby with curved walls and recessed lighting, and a gleaming 450-seat auditorium unimaginatively dubbed Theater One (Theater Two is down the hall and around the corner). And these days, Gunston's parking lot is packed, not during school hours but on evenings and weekends.

This is where SRO crowds forced extensions of "Sweeney Todd" and "Assassins," Signature Theatre's back-to-back Helen Hayes Award-winning Sondheim musicals. And where the river-hopping Washington Shakespeare Company mounted well-received productions of "Hamlet," "Uncle Vanya" and "No Exit," prompting speculation that this county-supported arts complex was intent on becoming a mini-Kennedy Center South.

This weekend, patrons can choose between Dominion Stage's raucous "I Hate Hamlet" and Horizons Theater's world premiere of "Peace and Quiet," a kitchen-sink drama by Kristin Kann. Last week, comic performance artist Robert Post played to packed houses, and the immediate future holds dance and choral concerts in abundance, as well as musical comedy. Downstairs, hidden away from audiences, costumieres stitch away at acres of fuchsia and peach tulle - "pink fog" outfits for another world premiere: "Rebecca's World" at Children's Theater of Arlington. And down a long hall, sets are being constructed for Opera Theater of Northern Virginia's "Love on Trial," which will play at the nearby Thomas Jefferson Center.

In the last three years, more than 100,000 patrons have attended some 190 separate productions at Gunston's two theaters. And while that's only enough patrons to keep a commercial movie theater running profitably for a year, both the variety and turnout have put Gunston on the map to an extent that comparable centers - Prince George's County's Harmony Hall and Howard County's Rockland Arts Center, to name two - haven't yet managed.

Hundreds of former school buildings across the nation were converted into arts and recreation centers when the baby boom went bust in the late '70s. What makes the Gunston complex different from nearly all of them is the philosophy governing its use of resources.

Arlington doesn't throw money at the arts - in fact it gives only \$75,000 in direct grants to artists and arts organizations (about 3 percent of the District's arts grant budget). Instead, the county offers its creative people something far more precious than cash: that scarcest of artistic commodities - space.

Gunston has plenty. Space for performing. Space for rehearsing. Space for building sets. Space for meeting. Even a tiny bit of office space (enough for mailboxes, answering machines and a copier). And with this space - which is parceled out at no charge - comes a bonus: free production assistance for those who want it from the recreation department's on-site staff, and free use of such equipment as microphones, lights and a professional fog machine that can make any poetry reading look like "Cats."

"All of that already existed," says Norma Kaplan, Arlington's Cultural Affairs Division chief. "We just figured out how to use it better."

It existed because Arlington, like most municipalities, has a long history of providing services for such recreational activities as crafts classes, volunteer orchestras and community theaters. Kaplan's division is part of the county's Parks and Recreation Department, which had for decades overseen the activities of amateur and grass-roots groups - the Arlington Symphony, the Columbia Pike Artists Studios, the Northern Virginia Folk Festival Association - not because the county was committed to supporting artists, but because these organizations give ordinary citizens a chance to play and perform.

Broadening that mandate to provide support for professional artists is something of a leap, but one that struck the county as sensible in 1986 when a study proposed a Recreation Department reorganization and the formation of a standing Commission for the Arts. The logic was straightforward. Amateur performers would benefit from proximity to seasoned pros, facility use would be maximized (giving taxpayers a bigger bang for their recreation buck), and - in what county literature began referring to as an "arts incubator" - small professional troupes could stop worrying about making rent and concentrate on making art.

The only problem was that, given the costs of doing business in Northern Virginia, Arlington didn't have many small professional troupes to incubate. Draping what was once Gunston's school library with black fabric and transforming it into the 130-seat flexible "black box" auditorium now known as Theater Two didn't guarantee that anyone would play there. Indeed, the space was initially used more for meetings and conferences than for drama.

Before May of 1990, when John Palmer Claridge arrived at Gunston as director of performing arts (responsible for booking not just Gunston, but all of the county's performance venues), no one had ever considered going shopping for performance companies. By that time, Arlington had established a new Ellipse Art Gallery in Ballston (supervised by Claridge's counterpart for the visual arts, Rita Bartolo) and committed itself to a \$1.2 million conversion of Gunston's physical plant so that the former school for baby boomers could serve those boomers again as an up-to-date performing arts and recreation facility.

As a result, the center could offer amenities unthinkable on 14th Street's Theater Row - rehearsal halls, dance studios, professionally staffed prop and scenery shops (containing such ready-made items as pantyhose potatoes, doorknob candelabra and a 10-by-3-foot ice cream sundae) and a 2,000-costume library (including a huge opera tenor's 56-regular 18th-century coat and a chartreuse goblin outfit).

When Claridge, freshly escaped from an embattled National Endowment for the Arts, saw all this, he knew struggling troupes would regard it as a treasure trove. The infectiously enthusiastic administrator took one look at Theater Two's empty schedule and started contacting Helen Hayes Award nominees - such local lights as Source Theater founder Bart Whiteman, Horizons Theater's Leslie Jacobson, and T J Edwards, who had just organized the Washington Shakespeare Company (WSC) with a dozen of D.C.'s most experienced small-stage actors. Would they, wondered Claridge, dangling the building as bait, consider basing their operations in Arlington?

The first to bite was Edwards, whose WSC was losing a small fortune in an expensive black-box space at Montgomery College. "There I was," Edwards remembers of his first visit to Gunston, "looking at this school library, not at all sure I wanted to cross the river. But there was no rent, and we were broke. ... So we shot in there to lock up the space, reincorporated in Virginia, and then went nuts in their prop and costume shops. It was like a big candy store for theater techies - huge rolls of fabric, chairs we could cut up in odd shapes. Amazing stuff! We built and produced Sartre's 'No Exit' there for about \$800. Our audience followed us from D.C., and it saved the company."

WSC's success at Gunston created a buzz, and the first beneficiary was Signature Theatre, a professional company expressly created by Arlingtonians Eric Schaeffer and Donna Lillard to take advantage of Gunston's new performance space. Though Schaeffer and Lillard had come up through community theater ranks and were essentially unknown quantities to area critics, their very first show - Sally Nemeth's blue-collar tragedy "Mill Fire" - received wide press coverage, something most theater companies struggle for years to achieve. Ticket sales were brisk. In just a few weeks, Gunston seemed to have achieved critical mass.

By 1991, Theater Two was booked solid with five resident professional companies and, down the hall, a refurbished 450-seat, cream-and-pastel Theater One (formerly the school auditorium) was playing host to the dozen or so community groups that Arlington had supported for decades. These older organizations - some of which had gotten so cuddly with the county that their press releases went out on Recreation Department stationery - weren't entirely happy about sharing resources they'd long had to themselves.

The expertise of the county's technical and design staff, which the amateur groups once relied on heavily, now had to be rationed so everyone could take advantage of it. "They'll tell you it's an equalization; we see it as a cutback," says Sharon Field, executive director of the Children's Theater of Arlington, which has been operating since the early 1960s with mostly adolescent volunteers who can't just be turned loose in a scene shop full of saws and hammers.

The pros also faced headaches. With both theaters fully booked, there was no time left for extending hits or lengthening seasons. And when the logistics of having so many productions under one roof got so complicated that rehearsals had to be scheduled in other county buildings, some artistic directors feared they were losing control. "It's like school," says Signature's Schaeffer. "The administration says this is where you'll be and when, and that's it. ... We were building sets in one school, rehearsing in another. And because they're county buildings, we had to be out by 10:30 p.m."

Kaplan's response to such complaints has become a mantra: "One of the reasons you have free space is that it's open

space; if you want exclusive space, you have to pay for it." That, as it happens, is precisely what Gunston's most successful companies are doing as they outgrow their "incubator." This season, Signature Theatre has flown the Gunston coop for a less protected but more commodious nest of its own - a former warehouse in nearby Shirlington. And Washington Shakespeare Company is considering moving to a Crystal City warehouse, conceivably in a joint tenancy with county arts facilities.

Kaplan sees the independence of these groups as proof that the system is working. "If they were moving outside the county," she says, "I'd be heartbroken. But when they stay in Arlington, I'm ecstatic."

And according to Arts Commission Chairman William H. Hansell, county-sponsored arts programs, no matter where they end up, can only be good for the county's economy. "I don't think it's just a question of the arts as a user of supplies, or a promoter of restaurants," says Hansell. "It's the synergy the arts create, and the quality of life."

He should know. As executive director of the International City and County Management Association, Hansell deals with more than 5,000 local governments, every one of which would probably second his comments about the value of arts to the community. Few, however, have been bold enough to adopt the county's policy of giving grants of space and services rather than money, or mixing amateur and professional organizations. Asked to name a similar program, Hansell is stymied. "Eugene, Oregon, puts a good bit of money into facilities," he says, "but I don't know about technical help. We're close to being unique in terms of the balance."

Claridge thinks the county's unorthodox approach - which he and Kaplan have essentially been work-shopping for the last three years - has the potential to revolutionize the way local governments support the arts, and both he and his boss have become enthusiastic proselytizers. Claridge wrote an article for American Theater magazine titled "Incubator for New Voices," and Kaplan waxes euphoric about the program's virtues to anyone who'll listen. The two sometimes finish each other's sentences, and are clearly on the same wavelength.

"If the groups hadn't done such good work," begins Kaplan, "none of this would have caught on," completes Claridge. But they also suspect that the county's tactic of positioning the arts as recreation is the real key to the program's success. And because every move the recreation department makes is inevitably preceded by public hearings, taxpayer input gets factored in early, and citizen outrage is kept to a minimum.

Significantly, Arlington guarantees freedom of expression to artists using its facilities; because that policy was hammered out in public view, there have been virtually no problems regarding content at Gunston. The well-publicized strong language, nudity and adult themes of Signature Theatre's "Unidentified Human Remains, or the True Meaning of Love" received not a peep of protest last season.

Trouble of a different sort is on the horizon, however. A new baby boom has school populations on the rise again, and Arlington's school board has been gradually reclaiming the building. For the past two years, students from nearby Barrett and Randolph elementary schools have been using Gunston's classrooms while their own schools are being remodeled. Starting in September, Gunston will again have its own student body, which will need to take back its shop (currently used for scenery construction) and band and chorus classrooms (rehearsal halls and costume shop). No one's talking about kicking the artists out entirely, since a new library will spare Theater Two, and Theater One can become a joint-use facility.

Still, school board member Darlene Mickey, whose husband sings at Gunston with the Arlington Metropolitan Chorus, suggests this could present security problems. "The location of the black box theater means there's a fair number of adults wandering the building," she says, "something we don't usually have in our schools. ... It will have to be closely monitored."

Claridge, who is frequently one of those adult wanderers, agrees. But he's confident that the recreation department's "excellent" relations with the school board can be maintained. In the meantime, he's dodging Barrett Elementary kids who barely come up to his waist as he escorts visitors to the scene shops, organizes the free, county-wide 150-event "Arts al Fresco" summer program, and struggles to transform Gunston's scattershot Innovators series into a three-week festival for May of 1995.

Lately, Claridge has also been trying to reflect South Arlington's diversity ("more than 30 languages are spoken here") in his programming. Joining the well-established WSC and New Works troupes in Theater Two this season are Staged Black (a new African American company), Teatro de la Luna (a Hispanic troupe that will present a multimedia assassination drama called "Romero" starting April 14), and the space's current resident, Horizons Theater, a much-respected 15-year-old women's company that relocated from D.C., filling the gap left by Signature's departure.

Those who worry that Arlington's largess will eventually attract all of D.C.'s small professional troupes can relax. At least as far as Gunston is concerned, there's no more room at the inn.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a line forming for vacancies. First spot on the waiting list, should any of the current companies check out of Gunston, is occupied by a homegrown Arlington troupe called American Century Theater, which will focus on American classics written between 1920 and 1960. The county's collection of period costumes should come in handy for them, says Claridge, gazing up in a two-story room crammed to the rafters with pants, blouses, furs, slips, hoop skirts, waistcoats, jackets and all manner of unidentifiable articles resembling animal parts.

"Somewhere in here, I know there's a vintage '30s cutaway with angled pockets," he says, running his hand down a rack of tuxedos. "It was my wedding suit last summer."

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