THE FINE ARTS CENTER

Since the college moved from old Wake Forest to Winston-Salem, there was a constant buzz about the need of the campus for a Fine Arts Center. While the Music Department struggled in the inadequate space allotted to them in Wingate Hall and the College then University Theatre was housed atop the books in the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, accessible only to the most hardy theatre goer, it was a question on many people's mind. The questions of the winded and patient theatre patrons who aspired to see plays in the theatres became more and more insistent toward the end of the 1960s. "When will you get a new theatre?" became a ubiquitous start to any conversation with the theatre faculty and students.

In 1969 Tedford made contact with two of the most prominent theatre designers in the nation, Jo Mielziner and Donald Onslager. The purpose of the contact was to see if either would be interested in designing the theatre spaces in the oft talked about but never built Fine Arts Center. Mielziner was the consultant on the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in Lincoln Center and The Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Onslager was a nationally known designer and consultant. Both replied that they were interested but it was Mielziner who was approached first.

Mielziner responded on December 2 with a gracious letter that stated in part:

I have just completed the final draft of my book called, "The Shapes of Our Theaters." In this, I plead to the planners of future theatre buildings to hold off going into elaborate architectural planning until the future users of these theatres sit down with their client or, in your case the Director of the University theatre and with the Theatre Consultant compile a detailed program. This program would cover the future
use of this theatre. In my book, I recommend that the architect commence his work after this program is found acceptable to all concerned.

I would suggest to you that, to be retained simply as a General Consultant would not interest me because only when I serve as an active and responsible participant can I properly represent and protect the basic design of a theatre, in collaboration with your architect.

Tedford had heard Mielziner present his position on theatre consultants and designers in a speech delivered at the University of Texas in 1964 in which he made it clear that the designer of a theatre should do just that. The architects of the building would then house the theatre in consultation with the theatre designer. Mielziner had had more than one unhappy commission with disastrous results where the architects had almost completely disregarded his designs.

Encouraged by the letter, Tedford approached President Scales about the possibility of talking further with Mielziner. Scales was enthusiastic about the possibility of Mielziner’s involvement on the elusive Fine Arts Center. Tedford then replied to Mielziner’s letter requesting a late January interview with Mielziner in New York. This interview was scheduled to take place at noon on January 28, 1970 in his studio in the Dakota on Central Park West.

This date fell during the semester break and Tedford traveled to New York by train with a group of students intent on seeing plays. The group was staying at the Great Northern Hotel (which no longer exists) on 57th Street, a hotel better known for its low prices than its ambience. On the morning of the January 28, Tedford walked over to the University Club where President Scales was staying and they took a taxi to
the impressive Dakota. They were told by the doorman how to find the first floor studio and walked through the mahogany-paneled halls to the door. They were greeted by Phyllis Malinow, Mielziner's secretary, and ushered into his studio. On the walls of the studio were designs of some of Broadway's most successful shows and Mr. Mielziner sat at his drafting table working.

A gracious and civilized man, Mielziner welcomed them and they talked about the dream that had brought them to New York. After a half-hour they went up to Mielziner's second floor apartment for a lunch, prepared by his Irish maid and cook. One of the things discussed at length was the type of space or spaces which would be included in the theatre section of the new building. Tedford did not want a Quixotic theatre space but a space in which any theatre artist would feel they could create exciting work without fighting eccentric irregularities. The chemistry seemed to be right and Scales and Tedford departed with a firm grasp of what Mr. Mielziner would contribute to the much needed and hoped for Fine Arts Center theatre spaces.

In the fall of 1971 things were beginning to happen. Grants were received from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation and the Ford Foundation to begin the planning process. The planning included a symposium to be held in March of 1972. The symposium had as participants a selected group called the Fine Arts Commission. In a letter to the proposed members of the commission Scales called it

"a blue-ribbon panel made up of students, faculty, administrators, representatives of the Board of Visitors, members of the Winston-Salem community and of the Boards of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation."

The Commission was charged with conducting "a series of full-scale hearings on March 23-24 to determine the scope of the program and the kind of fine arts center which will best serve the University and the community." The group was to be
assisted by a team of architects, theatre designers and other experts on academic buildings assembled by Harold Gores, president of Educational Facilities Laboratories in Princeton, NJ.

Tedford was in London in January, 1972 and President Scales called him there to ask if we still agreed on the importance of having Mielziner take an active part in the planning of the facility. The answer was a strong "yes." Hence, Jo Mielziner was contacted and joined the team of experts as the theatre consultant assisting the commission. Tedford was asked to serve on the commission as the representative of the University Theatre.

The Commission hearings were held in March and Mielziner was a very active participant indeed. He took several very strong positions. One of those being that a theatre should not be thought of as a multi-purpose hall and to make one work properly it should be designed solely for its singular use as a theatre. This he stressed over and over again. A second position that he skillfully defended was that the theatre was an instrument and should not be neither too large nor too small. It should be designed for the type of performances that were to occur in it. He insisted that the perfect theatre should seat no less that 300 and no more than 400, and believed that a 350 seat house was the ideal. A third position that he set forth was that the theatre should be under the sole control of the theatre faculty and staff and should not be constantly at the ready for whomsoever needed a hall. All these positions were music to the ears of the theatre students, faculty and staff. His contribution to the event was the primary reason that the administration was convinced to hire him to design the theatres in the new building.

The University Theatre's position paper was prepared by Tedford, Donald Wolfe, student Charles Harrill and Harold Moore, then director of building and grounds and an ardent supporter of the theatre. Three considerations were presented.
The first had to do with countering the argument that the arts thrive on adversity. The paper stated:

We have often heard repeated that the arts flourish where there are dire hardships, and that students really learn more when they have to use "make-do" solutions. Simplicity in the arts is often desirable but when the students must resort to it out of constant necessity, it is numbing. Wake Forest University will give a better education to our students in an adequate building. The better equipped the laboratory, the more effective the learning.

The second position was underscored by Mielziner's remarks and simply stated "The use of the spaces should be under the control of the Speech Communication and Theatre Arts department, and while we hope that the spaces can be made available for other campus activities, any permanent arrangement would dilute the quality of work which the theatre staff hopes to produce in the facilities.

The third consideration was that a Theatre Consultant be hired to work with the Committee and theatre staff in planning the main stage and theatres. Jo Mielziner was recommended.

The March meeting of the Fine Arts Commission set the stage for subsequent actions and the dream of a Fine Arts Center was beginning to look like it might become a reality. The next step was to hire an architect. Tedford sat in on the interviews of the 25+ architects who came to the campus to present themselves for consideration. One question Tedford asked each of them was would they be willing to work under the restrictions of having a theatre consultant have the final say on the theatre spaces. Only one firm resisted, the head of which had once worked for Mielziner in his studio. After
the committee visited the offices of CRS in Houston and Benjamin Thompson in Boston, the firm of Caudill Rowlett Scott (CRS) of Houston was selected to be the architects of the building. Frank Lawyer was to be the chief architect and Ralph Carroll was the firm’s programmer.

After being assured “that the theatre consultant will be representing the interests of Wake Forest in all contacts with the architects” Jo Mielziner agreed to design the theatre spaces in the new building. He was hired at a fee of $25,000 with the expenses for the project being paid by the client. Eddie Kook, the former president of Century Lighting came aboard when we engaged Mielziner. He and Kook worked as a team with Kook’s special field being stage lighting.

The planning for the new theatre spaces began at that time. In July there was a meeting in New York at the Dakota studio with Mielziner, Kook, Charles Allen, the chairman of the building committee, Donald Wolfe, Charles Harrill and Tedford. During this meeting some basic concepts were put on the table. The capacity of the auditorium for the main stage, whether there would be a balcony or not, the quality of the lab theatre and other matters which were to be included in the main program for the theatres. Mielziner also showed an intriguing model of a unique “ring” theatre he had designed but never had built. It included projectors and screens above the heads of the audience. At this time we were unsure of the amount of space which would be allotted to the theatre in the Fine Arts Center complex and therefore were concerned primarily with exploring our options.