

The Creative Arts at Brandeis

by Karen Klein

The University's early, ardent, and exceptional support for the arts may be showing signs of a renaissance.

Leonard Bernstein, 1952



If you drive onto the Brandeis campus in late March or April, you will see brightly colored banners along the peripheral road. Their white squiggle denotes the Creative Arts Festival, 10 days full of drama, comedy, dance, art exhibitions, poetry readings, and music, organized with blessed persistence by Elaine Wong, associate dean of arts and sciences. Most of the work is by students, but some staff and faculty also participate, as well as a few outside artists: an expert in East Asian calligraphy running a workshop, for example, or performances from MOMIX, a professional dance troupe. The *Wish-Water Cycle*, brainchild of Robin Dash, visiting scholar/artist in the Humanities Interdisciplinary Program, transforms the Volen Plaza into a rainbow of participants' wishes floating in bowls of colored water: "I wish poverty was a thing of the past," "wooden spoons and close friends for everyone," "get into grad school," "my first screenplay sells," "for J.O. to love me." The festival generates amazing energies, stupendous efforts, and glorious results. Still, it's very different from the festivals of the fifties when some of the most celebrated talents in the United States came to Brandeis to perform. That time belongs to the Brandeis that had achieved legendary status for just such programs. And what a legend it is!

The creative arts play a large part in the formation of this legend. In *A Host at Last*, Founding President Abram Sachar reports that Harvard's General Education Report of 1946 "was a formative influence in the development of the Brandeis curriculum." This report recommended forming a required core of courses from the

humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Brandeis's "significant deviation" was to add a fourth area to its core: music, theater arts, fine arts. The School of Music, Drama, and Fine Arts opened in 1949 with one teacher, Erwin Bodky, a musician and an authority on Bach's keyboard works. By 1952, several pioneering faculty had joined the School of Creative Arts, as it came to be known, and concentrations were available in the three areas. All students, however, were required to take some creative arts and according to Sachar, "we were one of the few colleges to include this area in its requirements. In most established universities, the arts were still struggling to attain respectability as an academic discipline."

But at newly founded Brandeis, the arts were central to its mission. From the top down, the entire community understood the creative arts as integral to the University's identity. Nothing better showed this support than the public face of its first Commencement week in 1952. Sachar had secured the participation of Leonard Bernstein as a commuting faculty member; as part of his role at Brandeis, Bernstein helped organize the creative arts festivals that were held during Commencement week throughout the fifties. At the first one, there were two premieres: the Brecht-Weill *Three-Penny Opera* and Bernstein's own *Trouble in Tahiti*. Other performances included Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, choreographed and danced by Merce Cunningham, poetry readings by Karl Shapiro and William Carlos Williams, a jazz festival, art films, and an exhibition of

recent acquisitions of art. The second festival, “An Exploration of the Comic Spirit,” included such diverse features as the American premier of Poulenc’s *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* and a symposium on the American comic strip with Al Capp and Milton Kaniff. The 1957 Commencement highlighted six areas: dance, jazz, poetry, fine art, chamber music, and orchestral music, and featured original compositions by three members of the by-then illustrious and industrious music department: Harold Shapero, who headed the electronics studio, Irving Fine, and Arthur Berger. Aaron Copland got an honorary degree and conducted a concert of his own works. Pearl Lang and her company danced and Stuart Davis, who received a creative arts award, performed a one-man show.

Brandeis continued to make a tradition for itself by showcasing diverse contemporary art and giving an important place to those who create it. Well-known artists were brought to campus to give master classes or to be in-residence. Student artists were encouraged as well. Suzanne Hodes ’60 remembers when her drawing teacher, Arthur Polonsky, suggested that, because her work reminded him of Oskar Kokoschka’s, she ought to go to his summer school in Salzberg. Hodes had no money, so she asked President Sachar for funding. He found a donor family and she went.

The Creative Arts Awards, established in 1956, sought to honor the best in fine arts, literature, music/dance, theater/film and later included awards in photography and in alternative and multidisciplinary forms, changing as the arts themselves changed. Originally funded by a few donor families and then underwritten by the Jack and Lillian Poses Institute for the Arts, the awards were given in two categories: medals for established artists and citations for artists in earlier stages of their careers. The medal winners are predictable and include the likes of Martha Graham, Isamu Noguchi, Vladimir Nabokov, Georgia O’Keeffe, Ludwig Mies von der Rohe, and August Wilson. Riskier were the citations that attempted to

recognize exceptional but lesser-known talents. The continuing careers of Debra Greger, Trisha Brown, and Mary Frank, for example, confirm their astute selection. Later a notable achievement award was added for exceptional work that transcends normal categories; awardees include Buckminster Fuller and John Cage.

A sitting commission of 20 to 30 distinguished professionals, artists, and patrons met at Brandeis House in New York to make the selections. These meetings, according to Laurie Ledeen ’83, director, presidential gifts, had a salon atmosphere, a party of knowledgeable persons talking seriously about art and engaging in high-level gossip. The award ceremonies, held at the Guggenheim Museum, were a glamorous, prestigious event, reported on in society pages and in *Vogue*. To bring the program more in line with the University’s mission and provide more benefit to students, though, the awards were discontinued, and the Poses Institute for the Arts now provides residencies for artists that rotate among the different disciplines. Actresses Mercedes Ruehl and Olympia Dukakis were among the first to be appointed.

Like the Roman god Janus, the creative arts departments had and continue to have two faces: performances and exhibitions are one; the other is teaching. Unlike Janus, however, the faces look in the same direction. Caldwell Titcomb, professor emeritus of music, remembers his and Leonard Bernstein’s class on writing musicals—Bernstein was writing *Candide* at the time and gave the students as their assignments the same problems he was struggling with. Coming up from New York, he brought along composer Marc Blitzstein and writer Lillian Hellman, who were also involved in the eventual Broadway production. Titcomb himself was a model of the multidimensional versatility of many of the early faculty; over the course of a 35-year career he taught orchestration, music history, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, the first course on Berlioz in an American university, a drama criticism course cross-listed with theater arts, and



started the ethno-musicology program. But he credits the building of a stellar, early department to the presence of Irving Fine: “You don’t expect a composer to be a superb administrator, and that’s what he was. He could do so many things and was in touch with the music scene around the whole country. Terrible, terrible blow when he had a heart attack.” As you enter the music building today, you encounter the bust of Fine done by Peter Grippe, Brandeis’s first teacher of sculpture and graphics.

Today we tend to identify the creative arts areas by the buildings: the Rose, Slosberg, Spingold, but even before the buildings, the spirit and energy and ingenuity were in full force. Artist and critic Charles Giuliano ’63 remembers when exhibitions were mounted in the Library and work was stored in its basement. The art studios were in the gym where, in addition to Grippe, Mitchell Siporin, the first faculty member in the department, taught painting and Arthur Polonsky taught drawing and design. They were later joined by Michael Mazur, who taught printmaking and drawing, but by then Goldman-Schwartz, housing the studios, had been built. Before that, the honors students were given studios in Ford Hall or the Castle; Giuliano had a secret room off the laundry where he painted murals of heroic figures, heavily influenced by his study of the *Illiad*. The strength of what he describes as a “unique program” was its insistence on balancing art history and studio art: studio artists were required to study art history, fine arts majors to work in the studio. Among the first art historians was beloved, eclectic scholar Leo Bronstein, whose

Mitchell Siporin, circa 1953



Mitchell Siporin, circa 1953

John Updike (right) speaks with students, 1966

Professor Emeritus Martin Halpern recalls that this issue occasioned very serious conflicts when Howard Bay was chair. But Halpern in his own career reflects the balance between academics and performance. A playwright himself, he taught playwriting to graduate students and academic courses in dramatic literature that were taken by students from many departments. He has now written the music for an opera, *The Satin Cloak*, based on a play he also wrote, *Tameem Aruhm and the Satin Cloak*, which was the first new play performed in the Laurie Theater in Spingold in 1966.

But before Spingold, one building that has come and gone was significant in the history of Brandeis creative arts. The Ullman Amphitheater was the locus of academic and creative activities. Underneath the stage in the cramped wooden building were classrooms for music and theater; after a while the music department had to move to a house across South Street. Because the facilities were so limited, theatrical production in Ullman was hampered, but Shakespeare scholar Professor Alan Levitan claims the best play he ever saw at Brandeis was performed there: Jean Genet's *The Maids*, directed by Daniel Gidron.



Peter Grippe, circa 1957



memory lived on in the annual Bronstein Weekend, until recently celebrated with various bibulous and libidinous activities in sometimes outrageous costumes. Until more art historians were hired, studio artists also taught art history. At times, relations between the artists and scholars were strained, often over issues of turf and space. Mazur recalls one department meeting when Ludovico Borgo was chair. Siporin had been delivering a lengthy monologue; Borgo interrupted and suggested that the painter allow the art historians to speak. Siporin responded, "Fine. I will speak as an art historian."

The balancing act—creative programs within a liberal arts institution—was, in different ways, part of the other arts departments as well. In music, for example, concentrators were required to reach a certain proficiency in basic piano, but Brandeis was "not a conservatory," and according to Caldwell Titcomb, the role of performance in an academic institution is "always a thorny problem" in relation to giving course credits. In theater arts, the department struggled to find the right balance to accommodate graduate students training for the M.F.A. and undergraduate liberal arts majors.

A new stage was initiated, figuratively and literally, with the building from 1957 to 1965 of the major homes of the creative arts departments. Slosberg, the music center, was the first, thanks to the profound involvement and generosity of Sam and Helen Slosberg, lovers of music and art. Their involvement with the University and their willing and generous support of the arts was crucial at this period, and in 1957 the Jacob and Bessie Slosberg Music Center, named for their parents, was completed. Performing at the building's dedication was the Juilliard String Quartet, including violinist Robert Koff, one of its founding members. The following year, Koff joined the Brandeis faculty as the director of performing activities in music.

When Koff came, there was a small orchestra; he remembers "it was so horrible, my first act was to disband

it.” Within a couple of years, though, Koff had in-residence a part-time string quartet, a wind quintet, a harpsichordist, a vocalist, and a chorus to join Martin Boykan, the pianist-in-residence. A most significant contribution, Koff feels, was that they brought music to the students; the ensembles played in dorms, in the Castle, later in the stairwell areas in Usdan, and in the Rapaport Treasure Hall, a facility whose acoustics, according to Koff, were unfortunately ruined by the University’s reconstruction of it. When Brandeis was an “intimate, small, way-out school,” the music department was very involved in many areas of the University: courses were team-taught by members of music and fine arts; a listening center for language, music, and spoken arts was established; joint concerts and readings with poet/teacher Allen Grossman were held; performers played for theater department productions and for fund-raising and admissions events for the University and for the National Women’s Committee, for example, a performance by Brandeis student musicians in Cleveland. Today, the performance tradition continues with more than 30 concerts per semester. Among the performances are those by the acclaimed Lydian String Quartet in residence and the Contemporary Chamber Players; in the “New Music” series, graduate students in composition can have their work performed by professionals; a gift from Hal and Evelyn Davis funds jazz concerts named in memory of Louis Armstrong.

In the mid-sixties, pianist and harpsichordist Rosalind Koff joined her husband as artist-in-residence, making them one of the first husband-and-wife teams at Brandeis. As well as concertizing, she taught piano and assisted Robert in classes, where they always played live music. Robert Koff remembers that “in my large lecture course, in order to get into the spirit of Schubert’s music, I felt one ingredient was critical if students were to appreciate [this music]; I brought bottles of white wine and they were sipping wine as we played Schubert.” Both Koffs were and continue to be

very interested in early music. Following Bodky’s lead (he had founded the Friends of Early Music), they established the first early music orchestra in Boston, giving Brandeis a prominent role in the early music movement in the United States.

Whereas music and theater arts each have one building, fine arts has three, built between 1961 and 1972 and designed by the firm of Harrison and Abramovitz: Goldman-Schwartz, housing studios, offices, and the slide library; Pollock, the teaching center; and the Rose Art Museum. Art historian Gerald Bernstein insists that the whole campus, in fact, constitutes a museum of modernist architecture: “What was avant-garde has now become history. “The various buildings represent the evolution of the international style towards a more complex geometry and more massive and sculptural shapes. The first master plan was done by the internationally known architect Eero Saarinen and in

the spring of 1999, the Graham Foundation is sponsoring a symposium on a new master plan for a still-growing University.

Even before the Rose Art Museum existed, a bequest of nearly 200 paintings from Boston art patron Louis Schapiro established a permanent collection for the University. The museum, a gift of Edward and Bertha Rose, was built in 1961. According to its fourth director, Carl Belz, “the sixties were a great time for the Rose.” Sam Hunter had been appointed the first director and with \$50,000 from the Gevirtz-Mnuchin Purchase Fund, he acquired an incredible collection of contemporary art, including works by Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Louis, Noland, Rivers, Oldenbourg, Indiana, and Kelly. At that time, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts had none of these artists and Hunter’s prescient acquisition spree focused the Rose’s identity in terms of collecting and exhibiting the art of our



Langston Hughes with students, circa 1967

Frank Stella, circa 1969



time. "It put the museum immediately on the map and up to speed" said Belz, whose intelligent leadership kept that orientation. Today the Rose Art Museum has the most significant collection of contemporary art in New England.

But a financial crisis in 1970-71 resulted in the museum's staff being cut from eight to four. By 1974 when Belz assumed the directorship, a new wing with space for offices, storage, receiving, and preparation had been added; "the only thing we didn't have," said Belz, "was any money." Belz decided to do small group shows of five or six local artists and kept that commitment for 24 years until his recent retirement. Over 500 persons, most of them artists, attended his retirement party.

One of the pleasures of his term as director, Belz maintains, was the "opportunity to work and learn from my colleague and friend for the past 15 years, our curator, Susan Stoops." The area artists shows are their collaborative efforts and he credits her with bringing a feminist perspective to their program. Stoops feels that the "gradual inclusion of leading women artists," for example Michelle Stuart and Dorothea Rockburne, has been significant for the museum, but emphasizes that this has been the Rose's policy for a while; Flora Natapoff was the first area artist Belz exhibited, a Frankenthaler painting was one of his first purchases. Stoops has curated several exhibitions including *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*, which brought her the International Association of Art Critics Award in 1996.

Beginning in 1977 and continuing to the present, much-needed support came from Lois Foster, who organized the Patrons and Friends of the Rose Art Museum. The annual area artists show bears her name, and for the past 20 years the Patrons and Friends have enabled the museum to present an annual show of national significance, including exhibitions of Alex Katz, Frank Stella, Helen Frankenthaler, and Joan Snyder. Exhibiting and

collecting are not the museum's only business, though. Objects from the collection are displayed in offices throughout the campus; faculty in several departments use the resources for their classes. The museum's educational outreach programs include lectures and workshops; *About Looking*, for example, brings local grade-schoolers to the museum for art-related activities.

Like the Departments of Music and Fine Arts that began with a single faculty member, theater arts was initiated in 1951 by Louis Kronenberger, a critic and historian. In the early years, all the performances were student productions put on by the Drama Club, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society, and the Hi Charlie Review. Ullman Amphitheater was fine for outdoor productions, but left them at the mercy of the capricious New England weather; lack of adequate indoor space made those productions small and not advertised beyond the immediate Brandeis community. The addition of new faculty, the desire to have a theater that found wider audiences, and the ambition to have an M.F.A. program in directing, acting, playwriting, and design made the need for an adequate space inevitable.

Brandeis has always had theater patrons, among them David Merrick, who donated a share of the profits from his Broadway productions. In *A Host at Last*, Sachar records that "Brandeis may have had the only college theater that was subsidized by the popular allure of a strip teaser" (*Gypsy* based on the career of stripper Gypsy Rose Lee). A gift from Frances and Nate Spingold made possible a theater building, which, along with a large theater space, included two small theaters for experimental and student work: the Merrick, honoring David's contributions, and the Laurie, given by Irving Laurie in memory of his daughter Barbara. Professional actor/director, Ted Kazanoff, remembers an undergraduate production in the Laurie of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* with Tony Goldwyn "whom I didn't know was a member of that family until afterwards."

But strong connections with Hollywood have always been part of Brandeis's story. Scholarships and fellowships have been set up by Samuel Goldwyn and Louis Mayer, honorary degrees have been awarded to Steven Spielberg, Barbra Streisand, and Whoopi Goldberg, and many talented alumni currently work in film and television in Los Angeles and New York. David Hardy, maker of films and TV documentaries, was hired in 1969 to build a film program within the theater arts department, but a car crash in 1970 ended his life, and the graduate program he had only just created survived for but a few short years through his momentum and the persistence of its faculty. Today film is taught in academic courses in the Departments of English, Fine Arts, and American Studies, but there are no comparable courses for a putative filmmaker as there are for future actors, directors, and set designers. There is at least a place to show films. Thanks to the generosity of Lew Wasserman, Silver Auditorium in the Sachar International Center has been equipped for screenings. In 1998, the auditorium was used for the Tillie K. Lubin Symposium, an annual event for the Women's Studies Program that this year featured short films by women, and for the Jewish Film Festival.

In 1965, Spingold was completed and dedicated at Commencement with evenings of readings by Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, Sir John Gielgud, and John Ford. Howard Bay, New York director/set designer, joined the faculty and transformed the department. Professional actors were hired; an M.F.A. was established; the National Endowment for the Arts funded a play about drug addicts, *Does the Tiger Wear a Necktie?* by Don Peterson; an international theater festival, Interact, was held in the summer of 1968, and, according to Arnold Reisman '64 in *Boston After Dark*, July 30, 1969, Brandeis theater had achieved "national prominence."

Despite a continued precariousness over the decades about funding, Michael Murray, theater arts director, is enthusiastic about the department, the productions, and the future. He



feels that the strength of the current faculty is extraordinarily impressive in terms of professional credentials and commitment to the team concept: “theater has to function with many people working toward a common goal; collaboration is the heart of it.” With subscribers from the community, the theater goes beyond a college audience. Two productions that he singled out for special merit were *Machinal*, an expressionist and woman-oriented drama by Sophie Treadwell and *Hotel Paradiso*, a French farce by Georges Feydeau. Pointing out that the department strives for productions that offer a contrast of styles from Shakespeare to musicals, he said we “stretch the young artists as much as we can.” A grant from the Laurie family for Brandeis’s 50th Anniversary will include two world premieres in 1998-99: a farce from alumnus Michael Weller, known for his play *Moonchildren* and the screenplays for *Hair* and *Ragtime*, and an adaptation of a 19th-century melodrama with music by alumna playwright Theresa Rebeck ’83, M.A. ’86, M.F.A. ’89, who has also done TV scripts for *Brooklyn Bridge*, *NYPD Blue*, and the screenplay for *Harriet the Spy*.

Last but not least of the areas, creative writing is not part of the School of Creative Arts; it is housed in the English department in the School of Humanities. Brandeis’s involvement with poets and fiction writers has been constant and strong. Over the years many distinguished writers have joined the faculty: among them, Howard Nemerov, Geoffrey Wolff, Frank Bidart, Olga Broumas, Jayne Ann Phillips; tenured faculty have been prize-winning poets, and the Fannie Hurst grant has enabled visiting faculty, such as poets Adrienne Rich, Jay Wright, and Louise Gluck, and author Stephen McCauley whose novel, *The Object of My Affections*, has been made into a film, to come for a semester; many, such as doctor/poet Rafael Campo and alumna Mary Leader have come to give readings in *The School of Night* series. Students are active writers and have published the literary magazines *Kether*, *Where the Children Play*, *Laurel Moon*, and *Artemis*.

Student involvement was very much in evidence in 1997 in *The God Project*, a joint venture of artist Jonathan Borofsky and the Rose Art Museum. Under Borofsky’s direction, the museum became a studio, providing students with easels, canvases, and paints. Students, regardless of major, were invited to come throughout the day and into the night and paint their idea of God. The turnout was enormous and the diverse, rich results were hung in a show at the Rose at the end of Borofsky’s residency. Curator Susan Stoops spoke of how much she enjoyed the “opportunity to witness the intensity of non-artists making art; their enthusiasm and focus were palpable.” She wondered if the University could make it possible for students to be able to access that part of their being on a regular basis, to “slip it in in the course of a day.” Students have places where they can swim or run; analogizing to noncompetitive sports, she asked what about a place where they could “tap into themselves as makers,” using materials in a setting that would not be a competitive classroom.

Student response to *The God Project*, and support for the arts in general, is strong. Based on the attendance at concerts and openings and on the burgeoning Festival of the Arts, the Brandeis community wants even more arts. According to Elaine Wong, the number of students, staff, and faculty presenting proposals for Festival of the Arts funding gets larger every year; the Festival now has events in both semesters. It behooves the University to ensure the arts a place of prominence befitting that interest. Charles Giuliano ’63 reminds us that “in all of the arts from music to theater to visual arts to writing, the track record of this University compared with all others of its size stands apart. Brandeis was created by a generation of Jewish people who made a deep commitment to the idea of the preservation of art and culture.” Speaking of this “powerful legacy,” he added, “Brandeis was always different; it cannot afford to be ordinary.” ■

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