



**Theater grads say “Farewell Wampler,
hello Forbes Center”** BY CHRIS EDWARDS

ADIELI THEATRE II



THEATRE II. WAMPLER.

Both names were dropped in nostalgic reminiscence as alumni from 35 years of productions in a former turkey hatchery convened in May to take a last, fond look and reprise a fun play from their student days.

Theater professor Roger Hall, packing to move his office across Main Street into the new Forbes Center for the Performing Arts, called the get-together the “Wampler Farewell.”

Cast members — in improv mode — razz each other during rehearsals and catch up on each others’ careers.

“It’s funny to come back and everybody has the same personality,” muses alumnus Jay Zehr while running his lines as “Baking Soda,” one of the food-product characters in *No Frost 17*.

Some alumni recalled a rumor that the hatchery-come-theater’s concrete floor was designed to slope toward Main Street for draining (yuck!) turkey blood. In reality, it was a stage area for hatchlings, not slaughter. The slope facilitated mucking out litter. Yet the Gothic rumor may better match the building’s second act: drama.

Reunion planners Gina Giambattista Cesari (’88) and Joyce Peifer Forbes (’89) rounded up alums, friends and former professors for the “Wampler Farewell.” Animation producer Randy Parker (’88), a JMU swimmer and three-time CAA Athlete of the Year, was not present to see the final production of the award-winning farce he’d penned. The theater’s youngest alumna, however, served as *No Frost 17*’s stage manager: Bekah Wachenfeld (’10), winner of this year’s USITT Clearcom National Stage Management Award.

Altogether 23 alumni put on one last show in Wampler/Theatre II. “This was our way to pay respect to the building that fed our creativity and expanded our Madison Experiences,” says Cesari. “Alumni, spanning 30 years among their classes, came back. Some traveled from as far away as Texas. This was the only production to ever be simultaneously streamed live on the Web.”

EXIT, TURKEYS

In 1974, when the Stratford Players — JMU’s drama club founded in 1914 — needed space for an experimental theater, then-President Ronald E. Carrier offered now-emeritus professor Tom Arthur the hatchery, which Wampler Foods planned to vacate.

“I was the first to come into the building,” recalls emeritus professor Allen Lyndrup. “The smells and the sounds were incredible.”

Then-physical plant manager Lou Frye gave the space a “bare bones” renovation into a no-frills theater, with office space that theater faculty shared with Frye’s department. At the reunion, Lyndrup spotted Frye’s remaining light fixtures, still equipped with bare bulbs.

The facility became “Wampler” until the 1994 opening of nearby Wampler Residence Hall (named for donor, alumnus and poultry company founder Charles Wampler). The ex-hatchery then became known as “Theatre II.”

Arthur recalls more than a decade of annual returns by large, migratory “turkey flies.” Not to mention the mice.

Air conditioning became urgently needed during warm-weather rehearsals for *K-2*, a production that had climbers stranded on the world’s second-highest mountain. All were grateful to a student’s father who donated an old unit from his business, and for acquisition of a former garage to store costumes.

Theatre II/Wampler was razed in August to make way for more parking for arts patrons attending Forbes Center events.

EXPERIMENTAL THEATER

The term “experimental theater” is a bigger concept than any building. At JMU, however, it’s received a major site upgrade.

For several centuries the more formal, “proscenium” theater — where a frame separates a risen stage from its audience — prevailed throughout the Western world, says emeritus theater professor Tom King, who shepherded JMU’s experimental theater for 30 years. “All this began to change in the 1950s with theater-in-the-round and experiments with thrust staging” — allowing cost savings and flexibility,” he says.

King adds, “The experimental theater movement of the ’60s introduced the idea that the design for a theater production should include the whole space, including the space occupied by the audience and



Theater majors reprised *No Frost 17* in Theatre II/Wampler to say farewell to the place many called “home” during their Madison Experience. (Left) Gina Giambattista Cesari (’88) helped coordinate the reunion event. (Below): Theater professor Roger Hall.



the physical relationship between the audience and performance.” Campuses began opening black box theaters for such innovation.

Enter, ex-hatchery.

JMU’s experimental and mainstage theaters have never been considered two tiers. Aspiring student actors do not start with the first and move up to the latter, alums say.

The two experiences are “parallel, and they’re different,” says Gina Giambattista Cesari (’88), director of *No Frost 17* and now employed by Cornell University. While faculty members direct most mainstage productions, students choose and direct experimental offerings, while also handling budgets, casting, sets and costumes, and often writing scripts.

“The shows typically done in here were a little edgier, more experimental” — providing chances to learn from mistakes, says John Michael Schott (’04).

“As I used to say,” King recalls, “We give them some rope and then stand back to see whether they escape or hang themselves.”

Getting that “rope” entailed compromise. In 1975, the theater’s debut production, *Hair*, followed intensive negotiations. Eventually, the administration agreed the script could stand unaltered, while the cast agreed to avoid nudity (an omission that would continue for more than a decade), says King.

He recalls the theater was “absolutely packed,” with audiences joining *Hair*’s cast to dance. Denise Cooper (’75), having first proposed staging the musical, later managed New York theater productions and currently teaches at NYU.

FINALE

No Frost 17, produced several times by undergraduate casts, competed by invitation in the 1989 KCACTF regional playwriting festival.

The edible personas bear larger-than-life hats, product labels and hand-held foods. Stage lighting simulates the refrigerator door opened and shut by unseen humans. The characters struggle to escape being eaten by backsliding dieter Kathleen Hannon (’85), a children’s novelist and veteran of Hollywood films, now living near Charlotte, N.C.

Fellow-alums, professors, friends and families heard “Russian Dressing” and “Ranch Dressing” — Annette Fama Jarred (’85) and Will Jarred Jr. (’87) — trade deftly-accented Cold-War barbs. This year the Jarreds of Trenton, N.J., veterans of mid-1980s productions including lead roles in *Candida*, celebrated their 23rd wedding anniversary.

“Lettuce,” aka, Tee Morris (’92), a fantasy/science fiction book author, gets dropped on the floor and eaten by a gerbil, but comes back as “Cottage Cheese” — a transformation groaningly dubbed “re-in-CARTON-ation.”

For the finale, the 22-member cast spells out the old theater’s names, singing in *Mickey Mouse Club* style.

Kevin Hasser (’07), “Salami,” is a professional actor based in Washington, D.C. Theater has shaped other thespian alums’ careers in varied ways. The audience included Steve Vitalos (’90), who manages event bookings at “a Hollywood mansion,” and Reed Hoofnagle (’92), who taps his stage-tech skills as a remodeler. Tracy Camp (’89) — “Tomato” in *No Frost 17* and remembered for playing Wampler’s first nude scene — says teaching in a Fairfax County elementary school now fulfills her yen for performance.

Jay Zehr, one of several alums who have remained in town, attended JMU from 1987 to 1989. He works in a group home, and acts and directs for Harrisonburg’s Playhouse productions. Randy Jones (’79), “Handi-



A breathtaking Forbes Center sets the stage for the arts to soar at JMU. (Right): The former Theatre II building was razed to offer more parking for the new center.



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— TOM KING,
emeritus theater professor

wrap,” and one-time *Marat-Sade* inmate, conducts public relations for Virginia Historic Resources. John Schott (’04), “Asparagus,” who performed a leading role in HBO’s *Angels in America*, is a financial aid administrator at JMU. Andi Arndt (’91), reprising her role as “Milk,” teaches theater and dance at JMU.

Arndt recalls the time Hasser sought advice while rehearsing to portray the lead in *Hamlet*. Hasser confessed, “I’m confused. I really have a problem with this character.” Arndt just shrugged, “So, what else is new about *Hamlet*?”

STUDIO THEATER: HELLO FORBES CENTER

Poignant as the “Wampler Farewell” event felt, theater alums recalled Theatre II/Wampler hardships. Stage tech Hoofnagle says the site “was a very flexible space” but contained “limited height and access coming and going.”

Problem solved. Studio Theatre — the venue in the new Forbes Center for the Performing Arts designed to house experimental productions and the Children’s Playshop — “provides greatly enhanced safety and technical capabilities,” says William J. Buck, director of the School of Theatre and Dance. Safety issues ranked high in the design of the catwalk. Buck adds, “The seating units will provide for an almost infinite level of stag-

ing configurations. The ability to platform down into the stage floor, and also use a second-level balcony for either audience members or performers, is a distinct advancement in creative possibilities. The space will challenge students and faculty to use their imaginations to think three dimensionally while

training with state-of-the-art lighting and sound equipment. On the other hand, simple productions can also be presented with better acoustics and lighting than has been available in the past.”

Hall is pleased with the temperature and noise control, scene shop access, and seating for up to 200 — versus 140 maximum in Theatre II.

JMU’s 15-year-old Children’s Playshop, founded by Buck, also moved across the street along with the experimental theater. The Children’s Playshop musical production, *Miss Nelson is Missing*, was the first-ever public performance in the Forbes Center. Waiting outside to line up for tickets and cramped hallways are no longer issues for JMU audiences. Attendees for *Miss Nelson* enjoyed a light show projected beneath the foyer’s high ceiling, and student actors had plenty room to mingle with the audience after the show and sign children’s programs.

The moveable stage, an innovative feature of the Studio Theater, thrilled the *Miss Nelson* audience. Forbes Center Director Regan Byrne explains. “The stage can move up or down, or even contain audience seats while performances happen in the normal seating areas.”

The cast and crew of *Miss Nelson* took advantage of the stage’s changeable structure as the announcer (a cat) surprised the young audience by peering out from a porthole in the moveable stage’s colorful frame.

Attention was soon redirected to the main stage as the curtain opened to a classroom scene of lively, miscreant children. The main-stage is not without its own state-of-the-art tricks, as exhibited by the teacher “Miss Nelson,” played by Elizabeth Chidester, (’10), who disappears and reappears during the course of the play.

More than 90 years after the founding of JMU’s drama club, 36 years of Theatre II performances and 20 years of planning, the Forbes Center ushers in a new era of outstanding performing arts at JMU. **■**

* Get a taste of the Forbes Center’s future successes and save your seat at www.jmu.edu/JMUarts.