



The curtain is raised

Forbes Center for the Performing Art sets the stage for JMU arts to soar

BY JAMIE MARSH

Mary Sue Nelson ('56) always imagines campus just as she left it in the 1950s. "I remember the beautiful Quad and rows of big old homes that were sorority houses," she recalls. It's no wonder she got "a bit turned around" when she returned this summer for the opening of the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts.

Facing Wilson Hall, the new bluestone and glass building is anything but hidden, but Nelson didn't think about crossing Main Street — especially through an underground pedestrian viaduct.

"I knew I was close, and then I saw a sign that said, *Miss Nelson is Missing* with an arrow pointing into a tunnel. I stared at it and just cackled to myself. Well, I thought, that's my name so I'd better go that way." There was no search party seeking this "Miss Nelson," but the signs for a JMU Children's Playshop production did lead her to the Tea and Tour Open House for Forbes Center donors and seat namers.

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— MARY SUE NELSON ('56)

Nelson joined hundreds of JMU alumni and friends who visited the Forbes Center over the course of two days in mid-August. Donors were invited to tour the spaces and seats now bearing their names, and JMU administrators thanked them face-to-face for making this dream a reality. “Obviously, buildings are important,” says Sheila Smith, director of annual giving. “For the arts, buildings are even more important. These students need special spaces to perfect their craft.”

This building will also help students display their skills — another big change from Nelson’s days at Madison. “The music department here was well-known for training, but we lacked a space like this to show off our abilities. Seeing this building, I know that Harrisonburg, the valley, and the world will finally get to see how truly remarkable the programs are at JMU. I’m glad I could be a part of that.”

A Sept. 8 performance by alumnus and country music superstar Phil Vassar (’85) was a sellout in the Shirley Hanson Roberts Center for Music Performance, which seats 600 in the Concert Hall and 196 in the Recital Hall.

Across the building, the cast and crew of *Metamorphoses*, based on the myths of Roman poet Ovid, were in rehearsal. The play opened Oct. 5 in the Dorothy Thomason Estes Center for Theatre and Dance. This wing features three performance venues: 450 seats in the Mainstage Theatre, 200 seats in the Studio Theatre, and 200 seats in the Earlynn J. Miller Dance Theatre.

Behind-the-scenes tours and open houses, led by volunteer guides, were offered for community members and employees throughout the fall. “Visit here anytime you want,” College of Visual and Performing Arts Dean George Sparks told one group of visitors. “You’re always welcome. Your attendance at our performances makes you part of our family. Your visits benefit our art students, all students, Harrisonburg, the valley and beyond.”

MUSIC AND SMOOCHES

Longtime Tri-Sigma and Glee Club friends **Shirley McKinley (’58)** and **Mary Sue Nelson (’56)** call themselves “huggers and kissers.” Their target – George Sparks, dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts. The scene – Forbes Center Tea and Tours for donors and seat namers. “Dean Sparks, and this building, are both big, big assets to Harrisonburg,” says McKinley. “I’ve traveled through much of the world, and there’s no better location on Earth than the Shenandoah Valley with its beautiful countryside and genuine people. Now the valley has a real home for music and cultural events.”



Former Glee Club friends Shirley McKinley (’58) and Mary Sue Nelson (’56) enjoyed their tour of the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts. “Now the valley has a real home for music and cultural events,” says Nelson.



Between snapping photos of the view toward Wilson Hall and exploring the new Shirley McKinley Piano Practice Room and Nelson Orchestral Library, the Madison duo indeed planted a few kisses on Sparks’ cheeks. “I’m at a time in my life when I’m happy to be able to pass on what I can,” Nelson says. “With my gift to the Forbes Center, I’m passing on my great love for music.”



College of Visual and Performing Arts Associate Dean Marilou Johnson (’80) and CVPA Dean George Sparks lead a tour of the new Forbes Center for alumni, donors and arts patrons.



COMING HOME FOR THE ARTS

For **Bev Harris ('68)**, there's nothing better than catching a show in New York or Chicago, except perhaps seeing the Boston Pops. "They are divine," she says. Harris seeks out the arts wherever she travels for "the uplifting experience I get when I see the talent other people can exhibit." Outside the Black Box, the new Harris Studio Theatre Lobby is a space that "celebrates experimental theater," she says, while bringing quality shows a bit closer to her home in Roanoke. "My husband and I travel to see a variety of theater, sometimes long distances, and now I can also come home to JMU."

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— **GEORGE SPARKS**
dean, College of Visual and Performing Arts



Forbes Center Executive Director Regan Byrne talks about areas of the Costume Shop, which offers state-of-the-art creative and storage spaces.

BLEEDING PURPLE FOR SEASON TICKETS



Joe ('77) and **Jo Ann Converse ('78)** never lost touch with JMU, but their love affair with the campus was reignited when their daughter, Jennifer Burke ('04), enrolled as a music education major. "Now we're diehard JMU fans," the former Parents Council members say. "We bleed purple,"

adds Jo Ann. In addition to purchasing football season tickets, the Converses made the trip from Williamsburg to Harrisonburg for Jennifer's many musical performances. "My daughter has performed in a chicken hatchery, the old Theatre II," Joe says. "She



(Above): Former Parents Council Co-Chairs Joe ('77) and Jo Ann Converse ('78). Jennifer Burke ('04), inset, says the new center matches student talent.

did her senior recital in Anthony-Seeger Hall. We have seen the need for upgraded performance space." Now, the space matches the talent, Burke adds. "They knew how much JMU music meant to me. JMU is part of our family."



College of Visual and Performing Arts Associate Dean Marilou Johnson ('80) shows university arts donors some of the academic areas in the Forbes Center.