

A Theater Legend

William Grandgeorge, the creator of Roger Williams' theater department, will retire this May knowing he made a difference in the history of the university and in theater itself



BY ROS BOSWORTH

When the bagpipes sound off on the Roger Williams campus in Bristol the morning of May 19, there will be an upwelling of nostalgia among the 17 current theater graduates and their parents, and a feeling of both nostalgia and great achievement by one of their favorite professors, William N. Grandgeorge, who serves as faculty marshal in the university's commencement procession.

His accomplishments are many, and on this day he reaches the pinnacle of a 50-year career in teaching — the opportunity to retire knowing that he made a difference. His story is the 40-year saga of Roger Williams' development in Bristol from a construction site — which he witnessed in the spring of 1968 — to a well-known university. He is one of the few who have weathered this great transition.

Describing his first impressions of Roger Williams, Professor Grandgeorge recalls, "It was the height of the '60s, when student bodies — here and elsewhere — polarized into redneck vs. long hair. The Providence campus was spread randomly throughout the YMCA and other buildings. Completion of the badly needed new dorm in Bristol was

delayed by a semester. Traumatic issues, such as the death of John F. Kennedy, Kent State University, Vietnam and the politics of Presidents Johnson and Nixon affected people's thinking."

His first challenge at the new campus was finding a home for a new theater department, and soon after, in 1971-1972, at the behest of then-college president Ralph Gauvey, pioneering a London program for its students. "Design a department," he was told by Gauvey.

Landing his department in a permanent home involved several years of investigating possible sites, drafting plans and lots of imagination. Some of these sites were on the new campus, as well as at the abandoned adjoining Army Nike launching site where he probed the mysterious depths of its watery bunkers with boots, flashlight and tape measure. Another site was the former Kaiser Aluminum plant in downtown Bristol, which the college owned for a short time. Meanwhile, a temporary location, such as the Coffee House Theater in the classroom building on the new campus, filled the bill.

The breakthrough came in the form

of the Theater Department's present building, the Performing Arts Center, known on campus as "The Barn." The core of this building was moved from an estate in Gloucester, Rhode Island, in 1984. The structure was moved piece by piece, and then modified to fit the unique requirements of a theater following a design laid out by Professor Grandgeorge. The building has since seen countless performances and thousands of theater students pass through its classrooms.

◆ LONDON PROGRAM

The London program was an immediate success and is still part of the theater curriculum. Close to 900 Roger Williams students have had the experience of living and studying in London, absorbing the modern stage as well as the heady atmosphere of Shakespearean pageantry.

Professor Grandgeorge sees London as the world center of theater activity, as well as an architectural treasure reflecting the period between the Great Fire of 1666 and the reconstruction years following World War II. "After the great fire, buildings were constructed by law to last forever, but after the war

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