

III: A window to the community

By Diane Smith
Broadside Staff Writer

The mud pit across from the Patriot Center on Patriots Circle has become a familiar part of the scenery on the south side of campus. But on this blustery winter day, I notice something different. Making my way around the corner I glance through the trees and across the familiar orange clay landscape. And suddenly there it is: a white precast giant raising up from the ground. Its presence is formidable; monolithic. Looking at it, you know it is something monumental in GMU's history. But what is it? Why is it here? And who will benefit from its creation?

Introducing George Mason University's Humanities III building, a state-of-the-art theater for the performing arts. Its stage arrangement, lighting and acoustical capabilities make it one of the most modern theater facilities in the nation. There's only one other like it—the Maxwell C. King Center for the Performing Arts at Brevard Community College in Melbourne, Fla. Both facilities incorporate the engineering genius of theatrical and acoustical consultant George Izenour.

With the Humanities complex nearing completion, it seems fitting to begin the new semester by introducing this newest addition to the GMU campus.

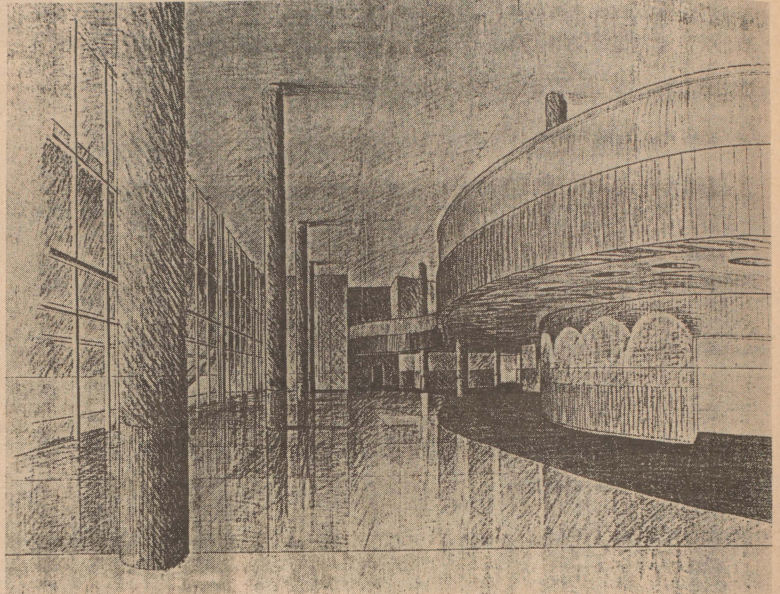
Humanities III, a new center for the performing arts, is the third and final phase of the complete GMU Humanities complex. Phase I, completed in January of 1988, houses music and dance studios, classrooms, a recital hall and the Black Box, a 150-seat studio theater. Phase II is a new administrative office building, completed last semester while Phase III is a grand performance hall designed to benefit both GMU students and the community.

Humanities III is meant to function as a "performance arm" of the entire Humanities complex. "Without it," says Maurice Scherrens, executive vice president for Finance and Planning, "(the complex) would be incomplete."

Construction began on the Humanities complex in 1988, after approval by the Board of Visitors and the Virginia legislature.

What makes the design of the building so special, according to James P. Wille, superintendent for Turner Construction, is that the same space can be used for a variety of events, ranging from opera to concerts to poetry readings.

With a maximum seating capacity of 2,000, the theater can expand to a large auditorium for major productions, or can be reduced quickly and with relative ease to an intimate seating of 800 for smaller events. The adjust-



An artist's rendering of the lobby for Center for the Arts.

ment is made via a hinged ceiling mechanism and adjustable acoustics. The stage is divided into two sections: the main stage, and an adjustable front "lift" stage, which can be raised to enlarge the stage, or lowered to become an orchestra pit. Portable rows of seats below can be placed onto the lift, then raised to stage

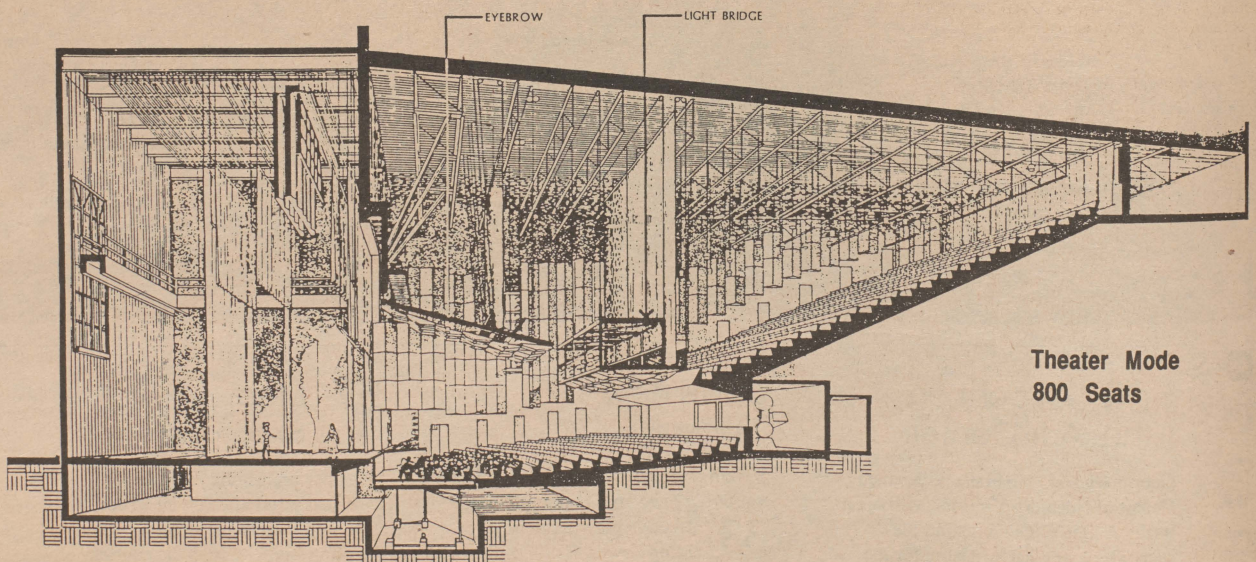
level for additional seating.

Sound variation is obtained with acoustic panels which can be raised or lowered, depending on the event the theater is used for.

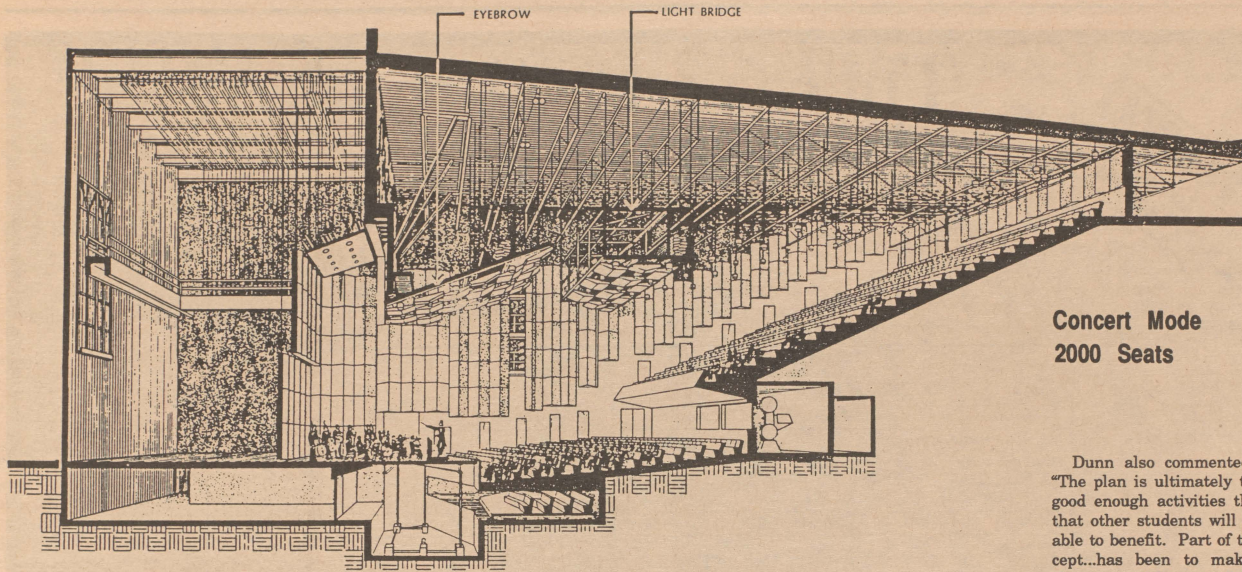
Many consider acoustical mastering a science, and the capability to adjust the acoustics and the stage should make the Humanities III theater exceptional. Ac-

ording to Randall Rode, Director of Operations, "Visually and acoustically, you end with two very different performance halls from the same building."

Current site plans include the construction of a reflecting pond, and a small amphitheatre for outdoor performances has also been considered. According to Joanne



Theater Mode
800 Seats



**Concert Mode
2000 Seats**

Johnson, chair of the George Mason Fund for the Arts, it is hoped that a contemplative cottage will also be built next to the pond, where students can go to read a book or play the violin, for example.

Landscaping will include a plaza filled with plantings and brick walkways.

Since neither the existing Harris Theatre nor Black Box theater can accommodate a full symphony orchestra or a large dance or theater troupe, the addition of a larger performance facility seemed only logical, according to Johnson. "Most universities have such amenities," says Johnson. "They were a bit longer in coming to George Mason because of financing. The question would not be raised at most

universities; it would be assumed that such facilities would be on campus."

Johnson also stresses the importance of a cultural facility which would tie the university and the surrounding community together. By bringing both professional and student productions to the center, the community and students alike can benefit from exposure to the arts. "Students should interact with people in the community having the same intellectual and artistic interests," Johnson says.

By bringing professional productions to GMU, including performances by the Fairfax Symphony and the Shenandoah Conservatory, the complex will become "part of the academic program, and will enable students to

be more culturally literate and exposed to serious theater, dance, orchestral music, visiting companies from abroad, and to be able to interact with those people," according to Johnson.

The construction budget for the building was \$10.6 million, and this year's annual operating costs are estimated to be approximately \$3.7 million, according to Jim Stampp, director of the budget. The facility is funded by state allocations, student fees and performance revenue. This type of funding is similar to that of other GMU facilities like the Patriot Center and the Field House. Student Union Buildings I and II are funded in part by revenue generated from food services in those buildings.

Revenue generated from the facility including performance

revenue and miscellaneous income is expected to be \$10,000 to \$20,000, according to Stampp. Figures for 1991 will be published later this month through the Office of Finance and Planning.

When asked why GMU would choose to appropriate funds for this building versus another academic building, more parking facilities, or additional faculty, Johnson says, "An educated person is a person who is knowledgeable not only about science or business or economics, etc., but is also knowledgeable in cultural values."

Helen Ackerman, assistant vice president for Public Relations, says that funding for buildings is separate from funding available for academics and parking. The funds that are allocated for buildings cannot be used for other expenditures.

"You have to be careful not to compare apples to oranges, and I think this is hard for students to understand," Ackerman says. "We get two different sources of (state) money allocated. One source is allocated for things like faculty salaries and other academic needs. A completely different source of funding is allocated for buildings."

Ackerman also noted that student fees, which can be used for partial funding of academic buildings, do not fund parking facilities or faculty salaries.

Faculty and student reactions appear to be mixed. Tom Dunn, producing director of theater, feels that the facility was a needed addition in order to enhance the performing arts program. He adds that another important aspect of the idea for a performing arts center is to provide all students, not just theater, music or dance majors.

Dunn also commented that, "The plan is ultimately to have good enough activities there so that other students will also be able to benefit. Part of the concept...has been to make sure there are tickets available for each performance so that all students—engineering, economics majors—everyone, can participate."

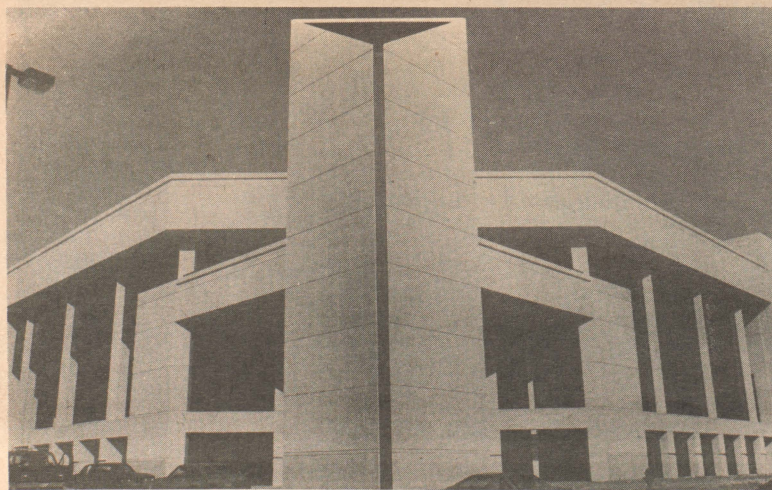
According to Rode, the center will benefit students and is a "continuation of the presidents drive to get the university national recognition."

GMU student David Kilpatrick said when asked about the theater that, "Having been inside, it's pretty and has potential. Unfortunately, some things are inadequate. From an audience standpoint, it's a neat place." Kilpatrick also added that he thinks the center "gives us a greater chance for bigger talent."

Whatever the case may be, the addition of Humanities III will have its benefits. With the completion of the building, the northern Virginia community will be able to enjoy professional performances without having to travel to The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Until now, the only local performing arts center was the Filene Center at Wolftrap, which operates only in the spring, summer and early fall months.

A grand opening performance is scheduled for Oct. 6. The actual performances for the fall season have not yet been confirmed, but Ackerman said GMU is currently negotiating with such world renowned artists as pianist Andre Watts, opera star Leontyne Price, and the New York City Opera.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the community, as well as GMU students, will benefit from the facility. Its presence, according to Johnson, will allow for "a blending of students and community, so that we gain support from the community and we also enable our students—when they graduate—to have a community that's receptive to them."



Broadside staff photo by Mark X. Myers

Humanities III: Dubbed by some as the Kennedy Center of Northern Virginia.