A Golden Anniversary for the Spingold Theater Center

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The arts at Brandeis have always represented a singular achievement in American academia. From the university’s beginnings in 1948, when the arts held, at best, a marginal position at American universities, Brandeis recognized that learning to engage with and nurture creative expression is crucial to a liberal arts education. The university’s long history of spectacular engagement with the arts, and its champions, bears this out.

Perhaps no building on campus better exemplifies the vibrant and enduring spirit of the arts at Brandeis than the Nate B. and Frances Spingold Theater Arts Center, which was dedicated 50 years ago in June 1965. Nathan Spingold (1886-1958) was a successful agent with William Morris, representing stars of cinema and theater, who became an executive with Columbia Pictures. His wife, Frances (1881-1976), was a dressmaker turned investor. The couple were prolific patrons of the arts and held a substantial art collection, including several important French Impressionist paintings. Their enthusiasm for the arts was matched by their significant esteem for the nascent Brandeis University.

Nathan and Frances Spingold made their first visit to Brandeis University in 1957. They were captivated by the bucolic splendor of the new campus, as well as the academic integrity of students and faculty. At the same time, the university was struggling to couple its aspirations for a world-class theater experience with inadequate facilities. The desire for a theater building of thoughtful design that could accommodate large audiences as well as foster a wide array of performance had been a dream since the university’s founding. Nate and Frances Spingold entered the stage, so to speak, at a crucial moment in Brandeis’ history, and their generosity established a profound legacy.

The distinctive aspects of the Spingold Theater Arts complex emerged from a need to wed utility with an aesthetic ideal. The clever design by Max Abramovitz ultimately connected the five performance and rehearsal spaces to a central hub. An art gallery off the lobby reinforced the interdisciplinarity of art and theater. The building itself was strategically located adjacent to the music and art centers, forming a creative hive in the west part of campus.

Although forward-looking by design, the building also pays literal homage to contemporary art history. One wall of the lobby contains decorative stonework from a demolished Chicago theater designed by Louis Sullivan. Sullivan, a celebrated Boston-born architect, mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright, and an inspiration to the “Prairie School” consortium of Chicago architects, was also known as the “father of skyscrapers.” This stonework is the only physical remnant of Sullivan’s work to be found in the Boston area.

The development of the Spingold Theater Arts Center was a fitting cap to the Spingolds’ long commitment to the arts and philanthropy and was met with boundless optimism and enthusiasm. In awe of the enormity of the Spingolds’ gift, Abram Sachar, Brandeis’ first president, was eager to describe the Theater’s early successes to Frances during their affectionate, decades-long correspondence. “We have practically a whole Broadway in this superb Center,” Sachar wrote her in 1969. “The most exciting factor
is the experimental aspect with several world premieres. I know how much joy this brings you when you consider how productively your generosity has worked out.”

The opening season of the Spingold Theater, which debuted on December 1, 1965, was indeed cause for celebration. The inaugural performance was a black-tie and champagne preview of Ben Jonson’s “Volpone.” The Shakespearean actor Morris Carnovsky, an adjunct professor of theater arts at Brandeis, played the title role in the comedy and was joined by a cast of Actors’ Equity performers. Broadway designer Howard Bay, Brandeis professor of Theater Arts, created the sets. Around 800 dignitaries, theater professionals and friends of the young University were invited to attend the preview by the Greater Boston Brandeis club, and President Sachar gave an address before the performance.

With the creation of the Spingold facilities, including three theaters, seminars and rehearsal rooms, and scenery and costume shops, Brandeis was able to inaugurate a graduate program in Theater Arts awarding master’s and Ph.D. degrees. In September 1966 the new graduate program became the 18th graduate area of concentration offered at Brandeis.

The Spingold Theater Arts Center allowed Brandeis to continue to build a reputation, unique among its peers, for celebrating art as a powerful construct of endless variety and promise. In 1971, Sachar wrote to Frances, “I often wonder how we could have gone on as a quality institution, emphasizing the Creative Arts, without this impressive facility.” No less august a personage than renowned Boston theater critic Elliot Norton took notice of the sea change. In describing the new Spingold Theater Arts Center, Norton wrote, “Some of the older universities are cool to the theater, or even indifferent. …Brandeis, aware and alert, and friendly to the arts from the beginning, has made plans to embrace the American Theater with new ardor in what well may be a significant union.”