



“KEEP A LOW PROFILE”

Adeline Hirschfeld-Medalia

In 1966 with my fresh PhD in Theater and Communication in hand, I approached Oakland University for a position. I was called into the office of George Matthews, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to discuss an interesting proposition: Yes, I was told, students were asking for courses in speech, as we called it then, but one of the professors, based on a partial reading of Plato, had been objecting to such courses because of their possibly “corrupting” influence on students at OU. Besides, it was thought by some in the faculty, though not by Dean Matthews, that the subject of speech was not compatible with the then exalted Ivy League standards the early faculty had hoped to establish. However, I was told that if I could obtain a Federal grant, which would initially pay for two thirds of my salary, I could have a job teaching one speech course each semester.

To avoid controversy, I was cautioned by Dean George Matthews that I would need to “keep a low profile.” Not wishing to jeopardize my new job, or relations with colleagues, I did not ask for further details on precisely who might be my potential detractors. For two years, I just quietly administered the \$65,000 educational grant I applied for and received, and dutifully offered my single speech course each semester.

During that period I had encountered no overt unfriendliness, so when my grant support ran out and I was free to pursue an academic career fulltime, I boldly attempted to add Per-

suasion as a second speech course. Only then did I discover the particular source and strength of the opposition. Adding a second course in speech was so controversial and a matter of such significance that approval for it would require a hearing and a vote by the full Faculty Senate! In my naivety, I was frankly unprepared for the verbal attack launched by my single opponent that day. Fortunately, however, a professor from this gentleman's own department spoke out in support of my petition, and the Senate voted its approval.

With my courses raising no more hackles, Dean Matthews, in 1970, permitted me to form an advisory committee "for advice, counsel and assistance in planning and implementing an expanded Speech Communication Concentration, a concentration leading toward an undergraduate major. . . ." The eleven member committee he suggested was distinguished indeed, with the Vice Provost, the Director of Institutional Research, the Director of Special Projects, Academic chairmen from Philosophy, English, Classics, Education, Psychology, Performing Arts, Linguistics, and the Steering Committee in Education. Now, it seemed, "keep a low profile" had metamorphosed into "be inter-disciplinary."

In May, 1972, not only was the concentration approved, but also a Department of Speech Communication with me, A. Hirschfeld-Medalia, as the first female chair of a department at OU! I would also be free to recruit an interdisciplinary faculty to teach some of the courses from the departments of English, philosophy, and psychology.

With that triumph came another truly delightful development: a request from Don Hildum, then chair of the Psychology Department, to join this new department. As a member of the Advisory Committee, he had discovered that possibly he would find there a more comfortable fit for his own interests and research. Later, we were joined by William White, who had recently retired as head of Journalism at Wayne State University. Still very vigorous at age seventy, he came in and instituted a Journalism program at OU, one with a strong liberal arts component.

Now that Communication was safely launched, I became restive to focus on my primary interest—theater. Don Hildum agreed to take over as chair, and I began the first formal discussions about a Theater Arts concentration.

There was, however, a serious obstacle: The year I was hired, 1966, also birthed Oakland University's professional Meadow Brook Theater. John Fernald of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art agreed to come over from England and serve as its first director only if he could set up a teaching academy at Oakland University. It would be strictly a professional training school for actors, with absolutely no academic connection to the university. This more or less foreclosed a viable undergraduate theater program because the black box studio and studio spaces built into the new Varner Hall were for the sole use of the Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Nevertheless, there was, indeed, among OU students interest in theater on campus—a student theater which had been developed by Tom Aston, a talented mime, was already operating in an old campus barn. (The Student Enterprise Theater, as it was called, operated precariously for several years, until finally the Fire Marshall ordered the barn torn down.) I proceeded to add a few theater courses to the curriculum, and since I had no theater in which to perform plays, I turned to other dramatic forms. I adapted several scripts for Interpreters or Narrative Theater productions (a form which makes possible the staging of fiction); joined with the dance teacher, Carol Halstead, in creating a dance-drama, and, with the collaboration of Charles Akers of the history department, produced a Bicentennial show which toured area schools.

Eventually, in 1976, the Academy of Dramatic Art was suspended as too costly for the University, and we were able to move seriously into theater. With the addition of two new faculty in theater, David Stevens, who came in to be chairman replacing Don Hildum who moved to set up a new department of Rhetoric, and James Hatfield, in stage design, along with Tom Aston, we could offer a full complement of theater courses and finally have space for rehearsals and performances.

How vivid is the memory of the first show I produced in the Studio Theater, G.B. Shaw's *Candida*, with a mixed cast of students and faculty. Sophomore, Melanie Neal, was a poised and crafty *Candida*, Brian Murphy was brilliant as Morell, her minister husband. (This was the first of three Shaw plays Brian and I did together.) Nahum Medalia, professor of Sociology, played crusty old Burgess, *Candida*'s father. (We both had to endure "casting couch" jokes.) OU's President, Donald O'Dowd, came at the opening and laughed along with the enthusiastic audience. I nearly burst with joy at a dream come true!

In the ensuing years David Stevens shepherded a major in Theater Arts. By 1982 we had close to 50 majors. We were now being administered in a School of Performing Arts under Dean Laszlo (Les) Hetenyi in a combined department of Theater and Dance with Carol Halstead. This was not for long, however. In 1983 we suffered a blow in one of OU's periodic cutbacks—the School of Performing Arts was dissolved and the majors in Theater and in Dance were phased out despite David Stevens' eloquent and impassioned pleas and evidence that we were more than earning our way, and despite support from many university sources. Nevertheless, we continued with courses and productions, until the major was reinstated in 1986, just about the time of my retirement.

Actually, for me, my last two years in the merged department of Music, Theater and Dance, under the chairmanship of that splendid gentleman, David Daniels, were perhaps my happiest years at Oakland. Most of my dreams had been fulfilled and I could enjoy new colleagues in the Music Department. Stanley Hollingsworth even composed some delightful music for the Pirandello play I directed.

Today, when I look over Oakland University's current catalog, I am stunned to see how the kernel planted back in 1966 has mushroomed, with all elements of my discipline represented—Communication, Theater, Journalism, and even some Mass Communication.

A "low profile" no more.