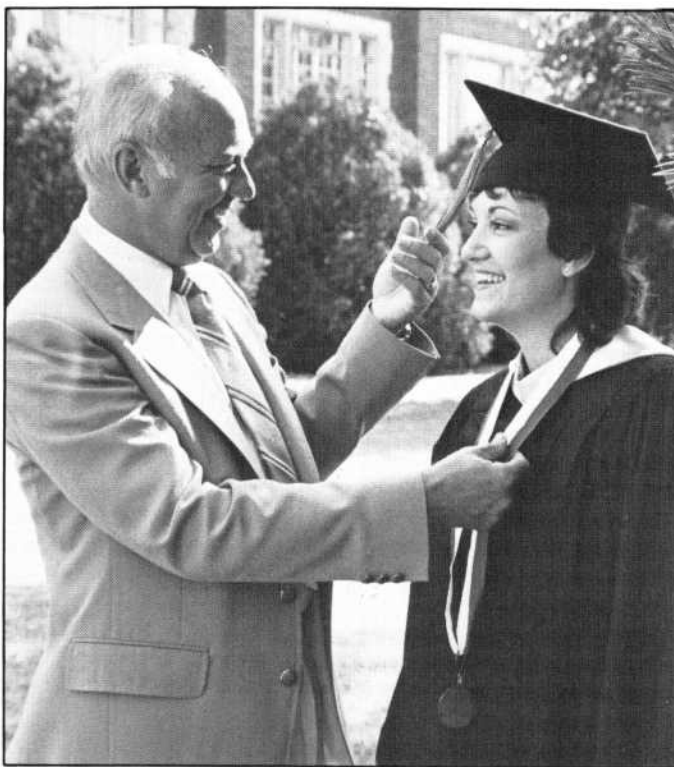


Master of Ceremonies

Dean of the College of Fine Arts. Master host for the campus. Impresario of OU's revitalized commencement ceremonies. Nat Eek moves from one position to another with the verve and flair of a ringmaster at a three-ring circus.

Eek handles all three of his University assignments with professional expertise and the dash of a born promoter. It is as chairman of the commencement committee, however, that his love of ceremony and skill at dramatic logistics are most conspicuous.

"In 1977, the year after commencement was first held in Lloyd Noble Center," Eek explains, "President Paul Sharp asked me to make the ceremony more dramatic and personal. I zeroed in on the processional, which had lasted 45 minutes the first year when all the graduates entered in one double line. Now the graduates march into the center from many dif-



Honor graduate Mary Ann Hooten models the gold hood and bronze medallion for commencement Impresario Nat Eek.

By PAULA BAKER

ferent directions and have reached their seats in 11 minutes the past two years. In order to personalize the receiving of degrees, I had a series of platforms constructed so students can troop up simultaneously and get handshakes from their deans while banners fall from the ceiling to designate the various colleges awarding the degrees."

More individual recognition for students with outstanding academic achievements has been achieved by a

unique commencement feature Eek instituted two years ago. Students graduating with honors may wear gold satin bachelor hoods to make them visually, as well as academically, outstanding. Those completing their degrees with straight-A averages receive bronze medallions bearing the University seal to wear around their necks on red and white ribbons.

"I try to add visual effects to keep the ceremony interesting," Eek says. "We use college banners and huge garrison flags, and I'm still trying to think of a way we can afford multi-media effects. I keep trying to underline the fact that OU's official colors are crimson and cream — a much richer combination than red and white — but a combination that is hard to obtain commercially."

Eek also is responsible for the large, rolled photographs of the Norman and Health Sciences Center



VIPs involved in the world premiere of "Bodas de Sangre" included, from left, Miguel Terekhov, Carlos Surinach, Zelma Bustillo, Walter Terry, Luis Fuente and Dean Eek.



Eek serves guests Ellen Binkley and Dick Taft the gourmet dinner he helped prepare as part of the 1980 Norman Arts and Humanities fund-raiser. A concert by the OU contemporary music ensemble followed.



Eek dons costume to create the atmosphere of Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech for a graduate drama seminar.



"Jubilee Summer," a fine arts tribute to the state's anniversary, was a festival of musicals, children's theater, fireworks, art shows and outdoor concerts.



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In a 1973 national ad campaign, the School of Drama offered a testimonial to its trusty Maytag washer and dryer for “missing only one performance in 7 years.” Eek is standing on the stairs.

campuses given to the graduates by the deans in lieu of the actual diplomas, which must be printed after grades are finalized. Just for fun — when funds allow — the graduates receive “phrizbees,” cardboard disks which are thrown into the air on the final “yow” of the state song “Oklahoma!” as the ceremony is concluded.

Eek’s success in dramatizing and personalizing commencement can be measured by the attendance, which has increased a third since he became chairman, although the size of the graduating classes has not increased appreciably.

“Commencement is rightfully a beginning as well as an end, and both students and parents want it observed properly,” Eek contends. “Any ritual gives the participants a sense of completion and accomplishment. Since a great deal of our lives is spent in seemingly dull repetition of trivial tasks that get us nowhere, occasional ceremony reminds us not only of achievement but also of progress.”

Eek’s service projects have earned him a host of fans throughout the campus, including a former first lady, Rose Sharp. “Nat Eek turned commencement into a pageant,” she recalls. “In an era of student unrest, when streakers threatened, Nat always provided something exciting and dramatic to remember about the

official aspects of commencement. He’s a born organizer — and he always organizes with flair.”

Commencement is not the only area in which the Sharps sought Eek’s expertise. “Those were the days of no money,” Mrs. Sharp says, “so we tried to boost faculty morale with welcome-back parties in the fall. Nat always was involved in organizing entertainment and getting costumes. He also helped us entertain private donors at events which inevitably were scheduled on the same evening as a drama or music theater production. Yet I always could call on Nat to help, and I could count on Nat and his wife Pat to be lively conversationalists at parties and boost the University with their positive attitudes.”

Vice President for University Affairs David A. Burr agrees. “Nat places the University first. He probably is unique among fine arts deans in viewing himself as responsible for all the University’s special events. He has both an outside constituency and an inside constituency. Inside, he presides over a faculty in which great artistic abilities are matched by great temperaments, and he does so with apparent ease. Outside, he is willing to be a master host for the entire campus.

“When he helps plan an occasion, it

appears effortless, yet has the feel of a major production with enormous attention to detail and a professional polish which is rare on a college campus.”

The ability to carry out a theme with exquisite detail gets full play in Eek’s assistance at such University affairs as banquets for the University of Oklahoma Associates. The 1983 Associates’ dinner, featuring an address by United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, had a Banquet of Nations theme with flags as centerpieces and table runners echoing the colors of the flags. At an appreciation dinner for School of Music supporters, boutonnieres and corsages were matched to floral centerpieces to add a note of springtime festivity while assisting guests to find their table assignments.

Eek’s eye for detail is not confined to great events. The same interest in finishing touches is carried down to smaller projects such as the gingerbread houses he constructs annually as fund-raisers for Norman’s charitable Christmas Store. The gingerbread hacienda, which was raffled off at the College of Fine Arts’ annual “Festival of Christmas Cookies” in 1982, was complete with green jelly bean cactuses, chili feestoons made of red jujubes, ceiling beams of brown tootsie-type rolls, red licorice ladders and a



Pat and Nat Eek, in left photo, prepare for guests at the annual fine arts reception, "Festival of Christmas Cookies." Above, Eek shows his secretary, Anita Corley, and assistant, Gretta Curry, the gingerbread hacienda which he and Pat made for sale to benefit Norman's charitable Christmas Store.

tiny southwestern beehive oven. The Victorian gingerbread covered bridge featured at the 1981 reception kept the Eeks up until 4 a.m. applying a frosting glaze to the gingerbread under the bridge to denote ice.

The invitations to the "Festival of Christmas Cookies" are eagerly awaited across the campus and the city of Norman and go to everyone who comes in contact with the College of Fine Arts.

"Most of the colleges at the University have holiday receptions as 'thank-yous' to other areas," Eek explains. "It seemed appropriate that the College of Fine Arts should raise receptioning to a fine art. Because all of our staff are good cooks, and making cookies is such a part of Christmas tradition, a 'festival of cookies' seemed the way to celebrate."

After mentioning his affinity for detail and pageantry, those who know Nat Eek usually allude to his love of good food and expertise as a gourmet cook.

"My mother maintains that I began cooking at age seven, when I marched into the kitchen and announced that I would make my own birthday cake," Eek recalls. "She was a good, plain Southern cook — although she made chili regularly in an era when few people had heard of it, and my father had special Norwegian recipes which

had come down in his family. I enjoy reading cookbooks and am always interested in trying out new recipes, although I don't mind repeating good ones. Pat is a good cook who likes simple recipes with interesting spices. We have a shelf of unusual seasonings which couldn't be duplicated in any single store."

Another Eek attribute universally remarked — his total commitment to all of the arts — dates back to his childhood in Rockford, Illinois.

"When I was a child, we went to the Rockford Symphony, museums and performances of touring opera companies," Eek says "My mother was a graduate of Pratt Institute where she majored in art. My father had a good tenor voice and always sang. I took violin lessons for a while from the concertmaster of the symphony and was involved in creative dramatics and art at school. When I went to the University of Chicago and later Northwestern University, there were 11 legitimate theaters in downtown Chicago. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came for several weeks every year, and I am sure I must have seen Yvonne Chouteau and Miguel Terekhov perform, long before they or I came to the University of Oklahoma."

This enthusiasm for ballet, which had just been introduced at OU, and

the opportunity to supervise final planning and construction of a new drama facility, the Fine Arts Center, brought Eek to OU as the director of the School of Drama in the fall of 1962. With Terekhov, he innovated a ballet degree program at a time when only two other state universities offered ballet. He also oversaw development of a performing arts facility which, with its Rupel Jones theater, still is considered a major success in campus construction.

"When I was growing up," Eek continues, "it was just assumed that all the arts complemented each other — that one should be familiar with them and enjoy them as much as possible. If there was some way one could practice them, then that was a marvelous release."

Eek's boundless enthusiasm and insatiable curiosity gives him an appreciation for and rapport with the working press that is not always found in academic circles.

"I've never run into anyone totally antagonistic to the arts," Eek says, "but I do know people must be told why a particular exhibit or production should be of special interest."

Eek does his bit with a weekly newspaper column called "Musings" which appears in *The Norman Transcript* and *The Lawton Constitution*. However, his influence in the arts

“Nat Eek is amazingly well-informed on all the arts. All fine arts deans try to be, but he is more successful than most.”

Governor David L. Boren, left, greets Eek, right, and Actor Lew Ayres, the film/stage star who appeared in: OU's production of "Our Town."



scene is felt far beyond the University and the two communities where his column is read.

Since he arrived at OU, he has carried his name and the University's statewide through membership on countless local and state arts boards and planning committees. When he was named dean of the College of Fine Arts in 1976, after a year as interim dean, he established the OU Touring Program, securing a grant from the State Arts Council to help take performances from music and drama and mini-exhibits from the art museum throughout Oklahoma, and even beyond. Exhibits such as the photogravures, "The Indians of Oklahoma," and the etchings, lithographs and wood carvings of Biblical scenes, "Images of the Word," have been booked as far away as Massachusetts and West Virginia.

Since Eek offices in the Museum of Art building, he visits the exhibits and staff almost daily.

"Nat is very knowledgeable about art and very supportive of the museum," Director Sam Olkinetzky says, "perhaps more supportive than any dean we've had. He is just as interested in the visual arts as he is in the dramatic and musical arts."

Working for a fine arts dean was a new experience for the director of the School of Music, Allan Ross, whose

pre-OU service was at Rice University and the University of Indiana, where the music schools are independent. However, he finds the relationship between his school and the college to be excellent.

"Nat Eek is amazingly well-informed on all the arts," Ross comments. "All fine arts deans try to be, but he is more successful than most."

Vocal music professor Russell Mathis agrees that Eek manages to deal even-handedly with his multi-talented faculty. "Whenever a fine arts dean is selected internally from a particular area of fine arts, there is a tendency to say 'Oh, he favors drama or music or whatever.' I really don't hear this about Nat. He shows great respect for the arts as a whole, not just the area he knows best."

Mathis is one of a reservoir of OU performers and artists who share Eek's outreach philosophy for the fine arts, and their willingness to contribute their time and talent is what makes his policy work for a variety of college and University projects.

"When in need, always go to the professionals," Eek contends, "and they will provide marvelous ideas and solutions you hadn't even dreamed of."

Eek's obvious pleasure in sharing OU's arts programs and his genuine appreciation of those who enjoy the

arts has brought material rewards to the College of Fine Arts in the form of private donations from the many personal contacts he has made. Anonymous donors, working through Eek, have assisted in the commissioning of the score for a world premiere ballet, "Bodas de Sangre," and in providing equipment for the schools of art, drama and music and the art museum. The Mary Clarke Miley minority scholarships, the A. Max Weitzenhoffer design scholarships and the unrestricted Barnett scholarships are among those he has helped structure. Fund raising for the new OU School of Music building is currently his first priority.

Nationally, Eek is active in the American Theater Association, which he serves as treasurer. He is a member of the executive board of the International Committee for Fine Arts Deans and is known by children's theater enthusiasts worldwide for his leadership in ASSITEJ. (The initials come from the French words for the International Association of Theaters for Children and Young People.) He was president of ASSITEJ from 1972 to 1975 and was one of three official spokespersons to tour China and Japan in March 1983 to recommend children's theater groups to perform at the Louisiana World's Fair in 1984.



On his way to the Fourth International Congress of ASSITEJ in 1978, OU's Nat Eek, right, visits the ruins and Roman Theater at Ephesus in Asia Minor.

Eek's interest in ASSITEJ has taken him abroad many times — usually at his own expense — both on and off the beaten tourist track since there is great activity in children's theater in Iron Curtain countries. He has been to East Berlin, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, France and Italy three times, Spain and the Soviet Union twice, and Sweden and the Netherlands.

Pat and one or all of the three Eek sons have accompanied him on many of the trips. The boys — now in their 20s — show the effect of exposure to a variety of lifestyles. Robert is in the Navy and anticipating a career with the State Department; Konrad is a restaurant manager, and Erik is in the construction industry.

"Nat's position as the president of ASSITEJ and the strong position he has maintained since his presidency is very significant," says Gregory Kunesh, director of the OU School of Drama. "It speaks for him as a human being and for his involvement and concern for people. I knew of Nat through ASSITEJ and the American Theater Association before I came to OU in 1975. He had a strong national reputation as an artist and administrator, which he developed early in his career and has maintained. No matter where you go in theater, if you say you are from Oklahoma, people

ask about Nat, because his leadership skills are based on a people-oriented philosophy. This has a tremendously positive impact on the fine arts at OU. The positive image he creates contributes to recruiting and to creating and maintaining programs in our individual units."

Since Eek became dean of the College of Fine Arts in 1976, he has had to relinquish some of his theater-based pleasures, including his great love — directing.

"I never did regard myself as a performer," Eek says. "My initial training was in design. I moved into directing, which I found more interesting, because I could research a script and unify that with a new concept, which is the nature of artistic endeavor. A great deal of art is the willingness to try new territory, because as soon as you play it safe, you end up with dullness."

Eek returned to directing in the summer of 1982 for "High Button Shoes," a highlight of OU's "Jubilee Summer." Arranged to salute Oklahoma's Diamond Jubilee, "Jubilee Summer" was a festival of concerts, arts shows and children's theater, and even fireworks. Even loftier endeavors were canceled by the Oklahoma wind which prevented the scheduled tethered balloon rides from the Fine Arts Center lawn.

Typically, Eek involved not only the schools of music and drama but also Norman townspeople in the performances of "High Button Shoes."

"The kids were a little afraid of the 'old bats' at first," quips Lukie Dunn, one of the veterans of Norman's annual hospital benefit, "Red Stocking Follies," and a self-styled "old bat" recruited for "High Button Shoes." "Nat got us all working together and made it a marvelous experience because of the wonderful treatment he gave everybody."

As the challenges of the deanship take away Eek's directing time, they also interfere with his joy in being simply a participant in creative activity.

"I love singing in the choir at St. John's Episcopal Church," Eek says, "because I can be involved in an artistic activity with no problems except showing up. Sometimes I just want to express myself creatively and be a part of the whole."

However, Eek's organizational abilities have moved him into the inner circle at St. John's as elsewhere. He is chairman of St. John's cloister building committee, active in the choir's annual fund raising gourmet dinners and chief logistics director for the candlelight Christmas Eve ceremony. The latter has grown from a few candles in aisle posts to 150 to 200 candles throughout the church. While thinking wistfully of the 2,000 to 3,000 candles used in European musicales, Eek is trying to devise a way to get more candles lighted before the first burn down and before the church's thermostat gets too confused.

Freedom and encouragement to contribute his own dramatic and logistical gifts in return for an inner need for ritual is obviously a part of Eek's deep involvement in St. John's. In return, the church strengthens his own outward-reaching commitments.

"Nat Eek is just an involved and committed individual," Kunesh summarizes his dean. "He obviously has a strong priority commitment to OU and the College of Fine Arts that is much stronger than his own personal ambitions. He always asks 'What is advantageous to OU or the College of Fine Arts?' long before he asks 'What is advantageous to Nat Eek?'"