



SHARING

A photograph of a stage with a curved wooden wall, a piano, and chairs. The stage is empty, with a grand piano on the left and several chairs in the center. The background is a large, curved wall made of vertical wooden panels. The ceiling has several recessed lights. The overall atmosphere is quiet and professional.

THE STAGE

By Chelsea Johnson

With countless hours spent on practices and rehearsals, many performers and directors often feel that the stage becomes their home. However, when that home is temporary – in the case of a community or privately shared, multipurpose stage, auditorium or orchestra hall – it can be very difficult to maintain that domestic feeling.

Entr'acte: The Show Must Go On

Directors and stage managers face several challenges when working with community theater sets. They often have to utilize a generic set that is immobile or inflexible and they usually have little turnaround time available for setup and takedown before the next group takes the stage.

When multiple users need to share a space to function in alternating ways, it is crucial that the performance areas be flexible and have viable options for set storage. Custom staging can alleviate the concerns that performers and directors have about both space configurations on the stage and the larger needs of multipurpose performance venues.

Out of the Pit: Performing in Portland

As a community cultural center, the Portland'5 Center for the Arts hosts everything from small community groups and children's theatres to major presenting art institutions and arts festivals. The inherent features of the 30-year-old building allowed for a distinct "Elizabethan" style performance, but outdated staging systems held the arts center back from cultivating a more diverse group of tenants and audiences. The center needed a multipurpose stage that would not only enable easier

transformation, but also better accommodate both intimate and large-scale productions.

Director of Operations Jason Blackwell knew that an integrated staging system was required for both stage managers and groups of varying sizes to be able to quickly and easily alter the performance space.

"Having the same system for 30 years has been really limiting in terms of how we can adjust the room. It has also been incredibly labor intensive and therefore expensive to convert because of the way it was designed. In an effort to diversify our ability to be an attractive place for different kinds of presentations and have short turnarounds that are not incredibly expensive, we decided to make this investment with an eye towards [building] a system that's not only attractive, but functional," Blackwell said. "That kind of diversification helps support our long range goal of being multifunctional and multidisciplinary. The more you can be flexible, the more attractive you are and the more bookings you receive or presentations you can offer to the public. We're all about accessibility and utilization."

Riser equipment was recently replaced in Portland'5 Centers for the Arts Winningsstad and Newmark theaters. Portland'5 was looking for staging equipment that was lightweight, sturdy, and field repairable.

Portland'5 was looking for staging equipment that was lightweight, sturdy, and field repairable. In the Newmark theatre, the goal was to find a way to raise the orchestra to allow the conductor to see what was taking place on the main stage. The existing orchestra pit contained a lift, but when it was between the pit floor and audience height, a gap of unusable space appeared between the pit wall and the lift.

The staging company needed to manufacture a solution that would allow the pit floor to be raised high enough for the conductor to see the main stage performance and still have the floor space for the full orchestra. The chosen company completed the task by using custom SC90 platforms and legs, aluminum guardrail and custom stairs to fill the gap between the raised pit lift and the rear pit wall. In the Winningstad Theatre, where the primary goal was to create an adjustable, tiered audience riser, they installed SC90 platforms with Adjustable legs to provide the flexibility to easily change rises and layouts.

The team who orchestrated the Portland'5 overhaul was recently recognized with the IAVM Venue Excellence Award for demonstrating excellence in the management and operation of their performing arts center. "Now that we can accommodate a variety of performers and groups, we expect more



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community groups are going to want to come and do their shows here – and that’s what we want. Art is for everybody. It’s not just for people who can afford the expensive, big-ticket blockbusters; it’s also for people who want to come see a more community-based show or are part of the community that’s producing one,” Blackwell said.

Scene Change: Fade to Black

Nestled in the shadow of the great Twin Cities, the suburban city of Woodbury, Minnesota, had its own theatrical conundrum to manage. As a community that greatly prides itself in its involvement with the arts, it was tremendously important to come up with the perfect “black box” solution for the town’s largest performing arts facility, the Merrill Community Arts Center.

Finding the right seating for their new black box theater was a challenge, given their need for something that could be transformed with minimal labor and cost. For Operations Director Michelle Witte, adjusting the configurations to fit many different performances was, and continues to be, an important aspect and purpose of the black box theatre. “We really needed something that had flexibility in setup options because we didn’t want to have just one look,” Witte said. “With the variety of shows we plan on having here, we needed a



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“With the variety of shows we plan on having here, we needed a seating riser that could be easily reconfigured for different performance layouts.”

— MICHELLE WITTE

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Today, Merrill Performing Arts Center is a multi-configurable black box theatre space utilizing SC90 platforms to create several different seating layouts that can accommodate myriad types of performances. The seating riser can be configured to have stairs in the center or outer aisles of the system and can be dismantled and re-arranged with ease. “We host a lot of plays but we don’t have a lot of technical experts, so it was really important for us to find a system that was durable, safe and could be easily set up by our volunteers,” Witte said.

Quiet on the Set

Although sharing the stage is a difficulty for many community centers, high schools and universities, larger groups such as the East Texas Symphony Orchestra (ETSO) have struggled with utilizing a shared performance space that has limited storage and few accommodations for the acoustical needs of a larger orchestra.

However, Music Director and Conductor Richard Lee recognized a more distinct concern for his group: musical acoustics. When dealing with multipurpose or shared spaces, the priority lies in determining what the primary needs are of the various groups who utilize the space, and then working towards a collective and effective solution. “The problem with

this hall is that it’s multipurpose,” Lee said. “It was very difficult to project sound out to the audience and there’s often no real volume.”

To rectify the two primary issues –the need for more storage and better acoustics—the venue at the University of Texas, Tyler and the ETSO needed to utilize the skills of multiple experts. To coordinate the effort, they chose Alec Stoll of Stages Consultants to be the theatre consultant on the project, ultimately leading the project by facilitating the teams necessary to both design and install the acoustical shell. The team led by Stages Consultants, which included Staging Concepts, required the expertise of the Symphony, the Cowan Center and the University of Texas, Tyler.

Stoll proposed a unique solution for the space hindrances in the venue; an acoustical shell that would utilize fly space, leaving more room for other groups to store materials behind the stage and relieving the venue of any concerns about backstage impact. “The biggest challenge in this project was that we were dealing with those who were not used to having an acoustical shell on a multipurpose stage. Once we got past their reticence surrounding the feared loss of space, we were able to create an incredibly successful acoustical shell,” Stoll said. “We developed a solution for their shell that completely clears the stage for other events and doesn’t compromise the fly space.”

According to Lee, the best part of the shell design is that it’s flexible and has the ability to take a different shape depending on the size, whether that is at maximum dimension for a full orchestra with choir, chamber orchestra or recital. “The fun part – and the challenge – over the next year or two is learning what kinds of standard setups we can have,” he said. “The possibilities seem endless.”

Nancy Wrenn, President and Executive Director of the East Texas Symphony Orchestra, praised both the process and the end result. “The acoustical shell enhances on-stage communication between musicians, increases the projection of quality sound into the hall, and allows for unique flexibility through our ability to reconfigure the space to accommodate ensembles of varying sizes,” she said.

Curtain Call: Sharing the Stage

Whether they are for show choirs, orchestras, jazz festivals or lectures, stages often serve diverse groups of users. To best utilize the space and storage, portable or custom staging is a preferred way to accommodate the needs of the many while not diminishing the unique needs of the few.

“When clients can imagine new and interesting ways to use their performance spaces, they can take their craft to a new level, and that is what the performing arts are all about,” Blackwell said. Sharing the Stage with others will always be a daunting task but, with the help of proper staging equipment and installation, even off-off-off Broadway productions can bring an audience to its feet.

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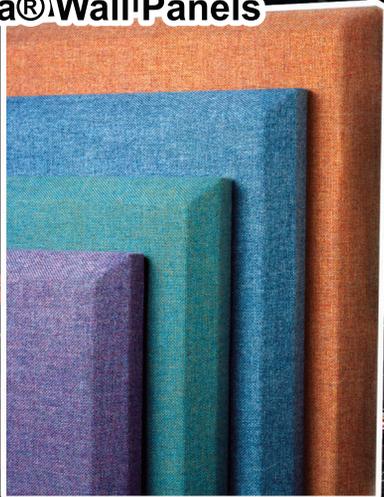


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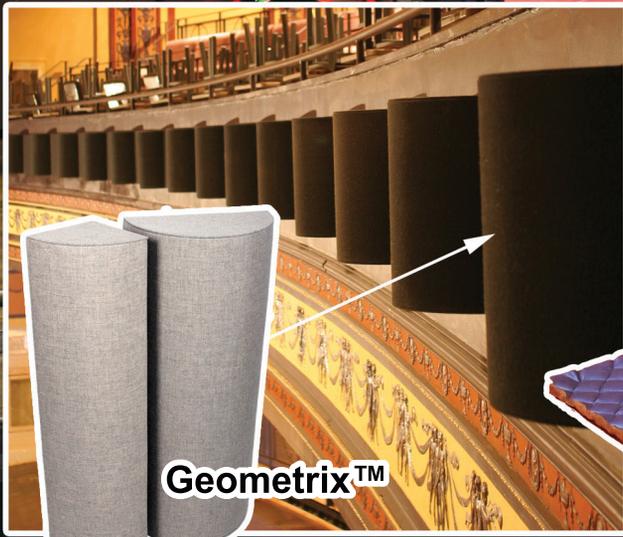
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