

A SHOWPLACE IN SPOKANE

A symphony orchestra finds a new home in a disused movie house

By: David Barbour

These are not banner times for symphony orchestras. Audiences are aging, budgets are shrinking, and the scramble for funding gets harder by the minute. If a company manages to stay solvent, that's reason for cheering. If it gets a gorgeous new home, which it owns—well, that's cause for astonishment. That's the case with Washington's Spokane Symphony, a mid-sized organization in a town of just over 200,000, which now has a building of its own.

And what a building: The Fox Theatre was yet another vintage (i.e., pre-World War II) movie palace that had fallen on evil days. A Deco showplace in its heyday, its gloriously decorated auditorium had been cut into three as it descended to grind-house status before finally being

closed altogether in 2000. At the time, it appeared that it would be razed to make room for a parking lot.

Fortunately, this turned out to be a near-death experience. The Spokane Symphony started a "Save the Fox" campaign, raising \$1.25 million to purchase the building. This was followed by a "Fix the Fox" effort, ultimately aimed at raising the \$31 million needed to transform it into a viable concert hall. Progress was slow, however.

Then, as was recently reported in *Symphony* magazine, Peter Moye, president of the symphony's board, and Brenda Neinhouse, the symphony's executive director, put together an innovative plan that would allow the organization to take advantage of two separate kinds of tax credits: the Historic Tax Credit, designed to

preserve older buildings of architectural merit, and a New Markets Tax Credit, intended to spur investment in poor communities. (The somewhat depressed state of Spokane's downtown meant the symphony qualified for the latter.) The process was long and involved, with mountains of paperwork, but the money was secured, and the way was cleared for the theatre's stunning restoration.

The history

The Fox opened in 1931, with a glamorous premiere featuring Charles Farrell and Janet Gaynor, stars of the opening attraction *Merely Mary Ann*. (Farrell and Gaynor were the top romantic duo at Fox Studios, the predecessor of 20th Century-Fox, and the builder of a chain of theatres across the country.) The building, pricetagged at \$1 million, had a seating capacity of 2,600; it was also built to accommodate live performances in those dying days of vaudeville—amenities included a full stage house, orchestra pit, and



dressing rooms. Among other distinctions, it was the first air-conditioned building in town.

Many movie palaces of the period were crammed to the hilt with rococo architectural details lifted from various European and Asian traditions—a kind of Moorish-Oriental-Italian look intended to heighten the exotic nature of the film-going experience. In contrast, the Fox was designed to be thoroughly up to date. The exterior is a sleek Deco box, with a notable absence of decorative detail except for a narrow neon light proclaiming the theatre's name. Inside, the walls are covered with murals by Anthony Heinsbergen, considered at the time the leading designer of movie theatre interiors. The murals feature floral patterns, water, castles, and clouds, culminating in the auditorium's showpiece, a 60'-wide sunburst that dominates the ceiling.

The theatre's prime place in the city's cultural life continued for decades. In addition to films, it offered live performances by the likes of Katharine Hepburn, Frank Sinatra, Patrice Munsel, and Bing Crosby. (The latter two are among the city's more celebrated natives.) It also housed classical performances by the likes of Vladimir Horowitz and Lily Pons. The Spokane Symphony performed there from 1968-74; according to the theatre's official history, the musicians often rehearsed there on Sunday morning, before the first matinee performance of the day.

The symphony bought the Fox Theatre—which has been renamed the Martin Woldson Theatre at the Fox, in honor of a key donor—with a dual purpose in mind. In addition to providing the symphony with a home, it is meant to create an income stream while reviving the city's cultural life. The overall programming of the venue is quite broad; as this is being written, future events include appearances by the country singer Shelby Lynne, Diane Schnur and the Spokane Jazz



The Fox Theatre in its heyday as the city's leading movie palace.

Orchestra, rock singer/composer Boz Scaggs, the Afro-pop band Orchestra Baobab, and *Purely Piaf*, a musical about the famed French *chanteuse*.

The renovation of the Fox posed paradoxical challenges; the building was badly in need of work, and its interior needed reconfiguring to suit the symphony's needs. Yet, as part of the funding mandate, its original look and style had to be preserved. For everyone involved, the project was a delicate balancing act, seeking to meet the needs of the past and present. Nearly a year after re-opening, all indications are that the project has been an enormous success.

The challenge

"The all-encompassing challenge was to transform a movie house into a performing arts facility," says Keith Comes, of NAC Architecture. "A

symphony performance is much more of a social event than going to the movies—everyone arrives early and mingles. Also, at the intermission, 1,700 people get out of their seats, and they all want to visit the restroom. The lobby and restroom spaces were totally inadequate for these requirements."

Therefore, the lobby was expanded by reclaiming retail spaces that opened out onto the street, located on the north and east sides of the building. The additional spaces, called the North and South Galleries, now provide additional room for audience members to mingle before the show and during intermission. "The expansion also gave us extra restroom space," says Comes.

At the same time, changes made to the auditorium affected the lobby as well. "The seat count came down from 2,300 to 1,600," says Charles Cosler,



Restoration work focused on all of the theatre's decorative details.



of Charles Cosler Theatre Design, the project's theatre consultant. "This was done by shortening the orchestra." Comes adds, "We created a new back-of-the-house façade at the balcony line, opening up a separate room between the lobby and auditorium. This inner lobby space is called the Founder's Gallery."

The creation of the Founder's Gallery illustrates one of the complexities of working inside an historic building. As Comes notes, the space prevents one from visualizing the volume of the original auditorium space: "The National Parks Service, who issues the Historic Tax Credits, was a bit sensitive about that, so we put into the Founder's Gallery four floor-to-ceiling glass panels, allowing a view into the house. It's half-inch laminated glass, which doesn't have great acoustical properties, so we added a set of drapes to cover the glass during performances." With these changes, there is now ample room for the theatre to fulfill its social function.

Restoring and reconfiguring

Inside the auditorium, the space had to be rethought to suit the needs of the symphony and its intended clients.

Again, however, the spirit and look of the original had to be retained. Cosler, who was involved for the project for nearly ten years and saw it through many different iterations, says, "The first thing to be done was to assess the footprint needed by the orchestra. Our original idea was to do a new stage house, which would give them the space they needed for storing the orchestra shell. Everything—the stage house, lighting, acoustics, and sound system—all had to be thought out in terms of how it would be used by both the symphony and outside groups."

The new stage house was eventually dismissed as being too expensive, and a new approach taken. "To get the orchestra to thrust over the pit, we used pit filler platforms," says Cosler. "But then the sightlines to the balcony wouldn't work. As a result, the balcony was repitched—actually, it was rebuilt and placed on top of the existing tiers, to allow for a deeper spacing between rows and greater pitch." Interestingly, he adds, "Looking at it, you wouldn't know the change had been made, because it looks so right."

The combination of the newly pitched balcony and reduced space in the orchestra led to the reduction of the seating. In addition, new seats were

supplied by Irwin Seating. "There were five or six different kinds of seats in there, assimilated from other theatres over time," says Cosler. "We picked the one that was most appropriate, and Irwin reproduced it in aluminum. It has what is known as a 'Shubert back;' it's a rounded shape and you find it in most Shubert Theatres. We also used LED lighting in the standards."

In order to deal with the reconfigured space, Cosler says that new front-of-house positions had to be created. "We did new ceiling ports that are integrated into the decorative painting in the ceiling. We also added new box booms, which are constructed so that you can climb up the ladder integrated into them and stand safely while working. And we added strong points and dry lines in the ceiling for trusses that may be used by companies coming into the theatre."

The theatre's proscenium is 27' high and 51' wide; the stage is 24' 6" from the curtain line to the back wall; with extensions, another 19' can be added. The stage deck is made of Southern Yellow Pine, and is an acoustically engineered resilient floor. (There are no stage traps or elevators.) The on-stage rigging system, supplied by J.R. Clancy and installed by Silhouette Lights and Staging, a Spokane theatrical supplier, features 35 counter-weighted linesets—20 dedicated and 15 free. Three are motorized. Also on stage are four electrics, four sets of legs and borders, a projection screen, scrim, cyclorama, three shell ceiling sections, and backdrop. The orchestra shell, which comes complete with integrated downlight, as well as the pit filler platforms, and risers, were supplied by StageRight Corporation.

The lighting package, specified by Cosler and supplied by Silhouette Lights and Staging, includes approximately 150 ETC Source Fours in various sizes and models, two Lycian 1290 followspots, and an ETC Emphasis lighting control system with

an Express 48/96 console.

The original 30'-high-by-62' wide house curtain was recreated. "It's a shiny royal crushed velour, with gathered panels alternating with flat panels, to fit in with the Deco architecture of the proscenium," says Cosler; the curtain was built by Stage Decoration and Supplies, based in Greensboro, North Carolina. "When we went in, the seats were red, with red drapery. It somehow did something to eyes—you couldn't see other colors the right way. The new interior is very green."

Cosler also did the architectural lighting in the theatre—which, in this case, involved refurbishing a number of historic fixtures. "This meant not only redoing the metal and glasswork, but also creating new lamp arrays that are more energy-efficient," he says. "We added downlighting over the entire house and under-balcony areas, too, to brighten the room a bit. Also, the gold columns and Art Deco fan features on either side of the proscenium are lit from the balcony rail, using color and templates." The large lay-lights in the auditorium and lobby were

originally lit with rows of incandescent light bulbs that posed both an energy and maintenance challenge. The first solution, LED strips, proved to be too expensive and complicated, and so a very simple solution of PAR 20 lamp arrays, oriented so their light beams are parallel with the glass, proved to be very effective. The architectural downlighting was supplied by Rambusch Lighting and Lightolier; it is controlled by an ETC Unison system.

Cosler also worked with Comes to identify and find room for other needed support spaces. Besides the control booths at the back of the house, additions included three guest artists' rooms and a conductor's room—each with its own toilet and shower—located on the building's south side, as well as two group dressing rooms on the north side. Also on the north side are a box office, manager's office, and a small green room, which acts as a multipurpose space and also as a catering staging area. "It really was a design challenge, because it serves so many purposes," says Comes. "It had to be an elegant conference room and



The restored auditorium.



Left: The restored lobby. Right: The 60' sunburst dominates the auditorium's ceiling.

a commercial kitchen, all at once.”

At the same time that these changes were being implemented, the considerable work of restoring the theatre's interiors was also taking place, under the supervision of EverGreene Painting Studios. “The first thing they had to do was remove the dirt, which was just unbelievable,” says Cosler. “Then they had to bring the painting back, which was a huge job.”

Jeff Greene, head of EverGreene, got involved in the project's early days. “About four years into the process, we did a paint analysis and cleaning test,” he says. “We determined that everything could be cleaned. Then the general contractor wanted to take the ceiling down, because they had to do so much mechanical work above it. There were some very challenging aspects to this project.”

“The ceiling in the lobby had been painted over,” he adds, “but the ceiling in the auditorium was intact. A scaffolding was put up to support the ceiling with a series of columns made of foam and plywood,” thus allowing the mechanical work to be done. “When we took it down, there was some damage to be repaired, but the ceiling survived. In the lobby, we

removed the overpainting, and revealed the original with all these fantastic plants.” One of them is so visually impressive that Greene humorously refers to it as “the acanthus leaf that ate Spokane.”

The process also involved a number of discoveries. “One unusual thing we found, out of many,” Greene says, “involved a huge mirror in the lobby, with starbursts on it. There's a pattern, used in the Victorian era onward, called glue chip glass; you put hot glue on the back of glass and, when the glue dries, it creates a snowflake effect. We thought they had used that technique to create patterns on the light fixtures and mirror; at some point, a worker spilled something on this large mirror and went to wash it off—and the whole pattern came off. That's when we saw that it was a scenic painting technique, using water-based chemicals to make the same effect. It took us a long time to reproduce it.”

Probing the theatre's interior revealed the presence of many decorative approaches, he adds: “They also used a technique called smalti—involving blowing colored ground glass into wet paint—on the loges located on either side of the

proscenium. It glistens in the light. The spray gun was newly invented at the time, and they used a spatter technique, which involved mixing oil- and water-based paints and spraying them through a gun, creating a splatter effect that is three-dimensional.” Another elaborate detail is the series of alternating panels of aluminum and glass on the staircases. “The glass is sandblasted, etched, and wheel-cut—a combination of all three techniques,” he says. “We also had to find a foundry that could cast the aluminum for us.” Indeed, the details never seem to quit: “Even in the men's room, there are stencils of athletic figures, made using raised burnished patterns.”

Fortunately, Greene says, the original color scheme was largely intact, eliminating one major research task. He seconds Cosler's comment that cleaning the space was a major effort. “Also,” he says, “we came in at the end of the construction process.” What pleases him the most, perhaps, is the project “was an absolutely comprehensive design—the carpet, the drapery, everything was considered as a whole. The function of the room is different, now, but they kept the finishes.”

Creating flexible acoustics

Obviously, when one is transforming a movie house in a concert hall, it's important to have expert acoustical consultation. Mark Holden, of the firm JaffeHolden, says he was in on the project at the very beginning. "The building had good bones, in the right places," he says, noting that, given the interior design, "there were more straight walls, rather than the curved walls you find in most movie houses, which worked to our advantage. The width of the room was close to ideal. The underbalcony was very deep, but the side wall shaping was good and the starburst on the ceiling was a good

the rear wall under the balcony. That eliminated many acoustically compromised seats in the back of the room, and it allowed us to re-slope the orchestra floor as well. It's a steeper arrangement now, which means there's more sound coming directly to people in the orchestra seats. We re-sloped the balcony; that was good acoustically, too."

Holden adds, "The old HVAC system wasn't up to code and didn't provide enough air changes; the new system is very quiet. We used much of the old ductwork where it was good, and some of the return air tunnels in the floor, which was very cost-effective."

In addition, says Holden, "We added some acoustic treatments to the upper concave, echo-producing rear walls, along with sound locks between the auditorium and the lobby. They were added surgically—the trick is to know when you *don't* have to do anything to it. We also created a custom shape for the movable orchestra shell, which fit the dimensions of the room. This is a room that is used for other kinds of performances, and we wanted them to have the flexibility to use the stage house for ballet, opera, and musicals, among other things."

To facilitate other kinds of performances, David W.

Robb, of Jaffe Holden, specified a sound package, which underwent a number of changes late in the process, largely for budgetary reasons.

The theatre now features two side loud-speaker clusters consisting of seven McCauley M Line boxes plus one subwoofer per side, with Crown CTS Series amplifiers. Control is provided by a Yamaha PM5D 56-channel console. "This is the first time we've used the McCauley product," says Rich Williams of EVCO, the sound gear supplier. "I think they've performed quite well.

There was some concern about them reaching under the balcony, but it's been okay." Other pieces of house gear include Clear-Com communications, a Listen Technologies RF assisted-listening system, and paging by Atlas Sound.

"There are two mixing positions," says Robb. "There's the control room at the back wall of the orchestra level, with permanently mounted equipment. But it's always better if you can get out into the auditorium, so there's another position at house left, about 20' off the back wall at the cross aisle. It's a good location with good access." Also, he notes, a proprietary digital audio connection links the two mixing positions to the stage. If and when the need to expand the sound system capabilities becomes clear, the infrastructure is in place for that to happen.

Keeping the balance

Looking back at the job—a ten-year journey for most of the participants—everyone recalls that it was a tricky proposition—if, ultimately, a satisfying one. "The entire construction period was compressed to save money," says Cosler. "Ed Walker, of Walker Construction, really did 175% in terms of getting it done. For all of us, however, it meant that every single item document in the drawings was questioned, rethought, and sometimes done differently. There was a lot of thought that went in during construction."

"They made a unique decision to buy a building and make it their home," says Holden. "I think that was really gutsy; it's also a testament to the dedication of the community. They've really supported the arts there."

"I gave a tour to my son's class," says Comes, "and a number of parents came along as well. About two-thirds of the way through, one parent said, 'Is everything the way it was originally?' Of course, the answer is no, but the fact that she couldn't tell for sure was a big compliment. It was a sign that we were successful in preserving the building." 📶



The theatre's exterior is a sleek Deco box.

acoustic canopy. The ceiling wasn't as high as one would see in a concert hall, but it was taller than most movie houses, and the proscenium was wider than most. It had a lot of potential."

"We really wanted to bring the string section as far into the room as possible, as the proscenium was throttling the sound, to some extent," Holden says, referring to the new stage apron mentioned earlier by Cosler. "However," he adds, "The biggest change was to bring forward