



On the Avenue?

Philadelphia Theatre Company takes its place on the city's street of theatre

By: David Barbour

New York has the Avenue of the Americas, but Philadelphia has the Avenue of the Arts. It's a section of Broad Street, between Glenwood and Washington Avenues, on which can be found a disproportionate number of the city's top cultural institutions. These include the Kimmel Center, Merriam Theatre, Wilma Theatre, and Academy of Music. You can find part of the University of the Arts' campus there, plus Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

And now you can find the Philadelphia Theatre Company (PTC) in its new home, the Suzanne Roberts Theatre. It's a sleek, modern venue, designed to fulfill this beloved institution's artistic mission, while giving it additional visibility in the urban landscape. Indeed, with its three-story glass façade and dramatic signage, it will be virtually impossible to ignore.

In putting together the project, PTC assembled a number of top architecture and design personnel, including the architecture firm KieranTimberlake Associates LLP, theatre design consultants Theatre Projects Consultants, Inc., and the acoustical consultant Akustiks, LLC. Their work has resulted in a building

with a stylish, up-to-the-minute veneer that features the amenities and virtues of a classical playhouse.

Founded in 1974, Philadelphia Theatre Company is devoted to new work; indeed, it has presented more than 130 new plays and musicals, including offerings by Terrence McNally, Christopher Durang, and Naomi Wallace.

For most of its history, PTC was based at Plays and Players Theatre, a circa-1912 jewel box that provided an intimate atmosphere for the presentation of new works. "It's a wonderful space," says John Tissot of Theatre Projects. "But it couldn't be replicated today, because of code issues. Also, it has technical problems—and there are no public amenities. The lobby is tiny, the rest rooms are difficult. There's no dressing room that's considered suitable or modern."

As time went by, PTC wanted a home of its own, a more modern facility that preserved what was best about Plays and Players. "They were happy there, and did great work there," says Tissot. "Part of our goal was not to lose that sense of intimacy, which would have disappointed their large subscription base." Richard Maimon, of

KieranTimberlake, says Plays and Players "is charming and intimate, but technically, it's in 1910. There's no accessibility for the disabled." And, he says, given its location on Delancey Street, "it's disengaged from the cultural life of the city. They were looking for more visibility." And that is exactly what Philadelphia Theatre Company got.

Modern lines, classic functions

As is often the case these days, PTC found its new home, on the southern end of the Avenue of the Arts, thanks to a real estate deal involving Symphony House, a big new condominium development on Broad Street. By packaging space for the theatre into the overall development, it was possible for the company to land a piece of prime Philadelphia real estate on the Avenue of the Arts. "Philadelphia Theatre Company and KieranTimberlake worked with the developer and his architect to sketch out the envelope of a stage house in the middle of the block, fully separated from the parking garage and the tower," says Maimon.

If the company previously dwelled slightly off the beaten path, it now



The theatre's marquee features the name "Suzanne Roberts" in neon-lined letters against a backdrop of red stainless steel.

has a dramatic look that announces it has arrived on the Avenue of the Arts. The 130' glass façade makes a statement, as does the striking marquee, spelling out the name "Suzanne Roberts" in letters lined in neon against a backdrop of red stainless steel. (Roberts is a prominent Philadelphia-based actress and television personality, who has long used her talent to promote social causes: She and her husband, Ralph, made a donation that, combined with a challenge grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and other donations, allowed the company to raise over \$27 million). Beneath the "Suzanne Roberts" sign, the name of the company is spelled out in widely spaced letters. Also located on the façade are 65" LCD flat panel displays that have animation capability.

The welcoming glass facades conceal the enormous, double-height open lobby area, which extends the glass and stainless steel theme of the exterior, and is filled with sunlight on

bright days. As is usually the case with resident theatres these days, the space is available for rental, and one imagines it would be an excellent party spot. Given the building's glass facade, the social activities in the lobby and the street life of the city are on display to each other.

The theatre itself thoroughly fulfills the requirement for intimacy and warmth. Indeed, entering the auditorium, one feels as one has stepped into one of the smaller West End playhouses. It can accommodate 365 audience members on two levels: an orchestra and a mezzanine that wraps around the room on three sides. (The side/mezzanine seating is designated for the disabled.) The seats were supplied by Theatre Solutions; they are upholstered with a custom fabric that includes PTC's initials. The interior's color palette could best be described as deep red wine, or aubergine; in any event, the result is warmly inviting. The walls are designed in an undulating curve

pattern made of glass-reinforced gypsum panels with a hand-stained finish; these have acoustical implications, but they also make the room cozier and more accessible. (The panels are individual units that attach to the wall structure beneath.) Lighting units built into the wall, located in coves behind the curve shapes, create a soft glow. At the same time, the upper portion of the room is unadorned, leaving the workings of the theatre largely exposed to view.

"The idea was to make a contemporary looking setting for new American drama," says Maimon. "We worked with Theatre Projects to make an exciting new space for the practice of contemporary stagecraft, which also expressed traditional theatrical values." Bruce Charlick, the theatre's director of production, says the goal was to make a space that was as flexible as possible.

The stage is 2,000 sq. ft. in area, with a sprung floor to accommodate possible dance performances. The

stage house is 60' high by 70' wide by 40' deep. The trap system, which consists of thirty 4 x 4' traps, was installed by SECOA; it is six modules wide, across the stage, and give modules deep. An independent floor-support system of legs and removable aluminum beams allows any trap to be removed singly or in combination of modules.

J.R. Clancy designed the onstage rigging system and safety curtain. The rigging can hold 65 linesets in a counterweight-and-rope arrangement. At the moment, there are 45 single-purchase linesets on 6" centers, with 46'-long pipe battens and demountable extensions; each has a payload capacity of approximately 1,500lbs. There's also a rope/spotline rigging system, consisting of 120 single-groove spot blocks, 7,000' of synthetic black rope, and 100 belaying pins; pin rails are installed at three stage and two front-of-house galleries. The forestage zone has nine beam running parallel to the auditorium centerline. These have beam trolleys mounted to them. A chain hoist can be mounted to any trolley, with local power distribution to the hoists.

The proscenium wall is covered with red leather tiles, in a herringbone pattern. Keeping with the company's contemporary identity, there is no stage curtain. The company's desire for intimacy is preserved, yet there is room for fairly sizable productions. This is a good thing, because PTC's mission continues to evolve; since the early days of planning the theatre, it has begun presenting musicals more frequently.

Tissot notes that one of the project's big challenges was fitting the auditorium into the space allotted and also making room for other amenities. "The placement of the condo tower and the parking deck largely dictated the position of the auditorium and stage," he says. "The remaining site for the theatre was an odd, L-shaped pattern." The existing

layout "was the obvious solution," he adds, "because there wasn't any other way to get audiences to face the stage and still have a fly tower with a sufficient height."

Tissot adds that there are three lighting catwalks placed over the auditorium, along with side ledges, a balcony rail, and box-boom positions. Followspots can be contained in the center control room when needed, located behind the seating on the mezzanine level. (This room features double-glazed windows, for sound isolation from the auditorium; there's also a special anti-reflective glass for the projection position.)

The lighting package, provided by Starlite Productions, of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, includes 336 ETC Source Four units in various sizes, 24 Wybron Coloram IT scrollers and a Wybron Eclipse dowsers, 14 Strand Lighting Fresnels, four 3" Fresnels, eight Altman Lighting nine-cell ground cycs, and seventeen 2K Nook Lites from Mole-Richardson. The fixtures were fitted with 784 lamps of various types from Ushio America. Most of the accessories, including color frames, color extenders, pattern holders, top hats, donuts, barndoors, and irises, came from City



The curved panels are made of reinforced gypsum with a hand-stained finish.



The theatre, which can seat 365, is designed for intimacy, in keeping with the company's mission to present new plays.

Theatrical. The package also includes 8,600' of stage cables, 5,100' of multi-cable, and distribution boxes. "One goal in creating the lighting package was to have a deep inventory that allowed designers to make last-minute changes without having to search for gear," says Tissot. "Now they have an extensive package on premises, including all the hardware." There are five Lex Products company switches found throughout the building.

The theatre has an ETC Eos lighting console, making it one of the first regional theatres to take on this new product. "They were dead set on ETC," says Tissot. "Everyone who works with them knows how to work ETC consoles. Originally, an Obsession was specified, but this was during the advent of Eos. There was some trepidation that Eos wouldn't be ready. There was a deliberation: Should we go with a board that the manufacturer is no longer supporting, or go with a new board that might not be fully debugged?"

In the end, he says, "We went with

the Eos, because it can handle motorized lighting accessories—scrollers, motorized lamps—with greater ease during short production periods. Everyone we talked with said Eos is friendlier to motorized gear." The dimming package is by ETC; an ETC Unison system controls the house lighting. Lighting, dimming, and control, as well as house lighting gear, was supplied by PRG. The theatre is also equipped with black velour legs and borders, two sharktooth scrims—one black and one white—a seamless muslin bounce drop and a seamless plastic RP cyclorama; the latter four are all 30 x 46', and were supplied by Rose Brand.

Considerable attention has been paid to ADA requirements, including accessible bathrooms, wheelchair seating in both the mezzanine and orchestra (with elevator access between both levels), wheelchair-level ticket booths, assisted listening devices, Braille signage throughout the building, Braille programs at all performances, and automatic entrance doors at the street level.

(The theatre also schedules open-caption and audio-described performances.) "The goal is to be the most accessible theatre in the region," says Maimon.

Tissot notes that the theatre's original wish list, in terms of ancillary facilities, shrank as the site and budget limitations became clear. Still, there's a shop area in the back of the stage house, where small scenic projects can be undertaken and props can be made and stored. (The theatre contracts out its scenic projects to local builders.) Also, the theatre's loading dock piggybacks onto the dock used by Symphony House, making load-ins relatively easy. There's also a full set of dressing rooms—two single-person rooms and a suite of three rooms accommodating another 18 performers comfortably—a wardrobe room and a green room. A second stage venue is accessible from the second lobby level. It is a room with windows; the closing of the shades signal the start of whatever event is being held there.

Acoustics for modern drama

"Intimacy was a key criterion for the design team," says Paul Scarborough, of the acoustical firm Akustiks, echoing his colleagues. "The Plays and Players Theatre is extraordinarily intimate. The goal was to keep that in the new building."

This proved to be a two-part task. The first issue to be dealt with had to do with the theatre's relationship to the rest of the Symphony House complex. "One challenge, which had to be met early on, involved isolating the theatre from the noise on Broad Street and the garage overhead, as well as the Broad Street subway, which is only 20' from the back wall of the audience chamber. We had a subsurface noise and vibration survey done, to find out if the subway noise was intrusive enough to reach into the theatre. It was, so we worked with Wilson Ihrig Associates [the vibration consultant] to 'float' the theatre. The steel frame of the theatre and stage bear on large rubber pads, hidden below the floor. The audience chamber and stage float on these— there's an acoustic isolation joint around the perimeter of the auditorium.

"The second challenge," he says, "was creating an acoustically intimate environment, so unamplified speech could be heard. The theatre's mission is to do contemporary American plays. We worked with KieranTimberlake and Theatre Projects to create the smallest space possible and still accommodate the seating. We also worked with Theatre Projects on creating an efficient seating layout. And we worked really hard to push the ceiling down, as much as possible without compromising lighting positions, to make the cubic volume smaller." He hastens to add, "We didn't compromise contemporary standards of seating; there's still plenty of leg room between the rows."

Akustiks also worked with Marvin Waxman Consulting Engineers [the

project's mechanical engineer] on an HVAC system that would meet the PNC 15 Noise Criterion; air is delivered to the room from above. "We tried to get the mechanical rooms as far from the theatre as possible," says Scarborough. "They're located over the dressing rooms on the Lombard Street side of the building."

In the auditorium, the acoustician says, "We did have to ensure that we could get some good sonic diffusion, so the sound would be evenly scattered across the space. KieranTimberlake came up with a brilliant solution in those wave-shaped panels that cover the walls. We talked about the kind of diffusion that we needed, and they responded with this idea. We refined them a little bit, and they evolved into what you see in the theatre today. They create a warm, articulated texture to the theatre, and they also serve an important acoustical purpose."

Akustiks also specified a full sound system for the theatre. Anthony Nattoli and Sam Brandt, of that firm, were in charge of this task. "We did a full sound reinforcement, technical, communications, and video infrastructure for them," he adds. "Yes, they mostly do straight plays, but there are a couple of musicals each season, and there was a strong desire to accommodate other functions, such as corporate presentations. In fact, the theatre has the perfect volume for a corporate meeting."

In terms of sound reinforcement, the auditorium has a left-right-center system made up of EAW loudspeakers and subs. The center cluster consists of that company's AX Series, with JF Series units at left and right. The AX units are billed as providing plenty of power combined with tight pattern control, a feature that, one imagines, would be important here. The JF units feature a compact design—again, a useful quality in this intimate venue. "The system is fairly well integrated into the space," says

Nittoli. "The only aspect you can see is the center cluster and a few under-balcony speakers.

"Although we work with every company, we do use a lot of EAW products," he adds. "It's primarily because they seem to have something for every application. Many companies have great main arrays, but not many have a good selection of smaller devices for fill and under-balcony positions. EAW has a good range of products."

Nittoli turned to Yamaha for the sound console, choosing an LS932. "It has nice small dimensions, yet is feature-packed," he says. "It has a very small footprint, which is great from a production standpoint. Also, it's very intuitive, one of the mostly widely accepted boards available. The company doesn't do musicals all the time, so the board had to be easy to run. We've used it on quite a few projects, with a good deal of success.

A modest complement of mics was specified from Shure, AKG, and Sennheiser, with an emphasis on Shure. "It's not a huge package," Nittoli says. "We didn't specify any wireless; they can rent that when they're doing a musical." There's also a Telex four-channel production intercom system. Philadelphia Sound Productions supplied the sound gear.

The Suzanne Roberts Theatre combines the professionalism of the U.S. resident theatre community with the excitement of a grand design statement. Charlick says Theatre Projects was an ideal consultant, because of its experience in the resident theatre scene. "I have a great fondness for LORT companies," says Tissot; "that's where I grew up. Also, Wes Hacking, the project manager from PRG, was previously the assistant lighting designer at Philadelphia Company. I think we're all thrilled with how it turned out." Maimon adds, simply, "It's based on the idea of theatre as both performance and event." 🎭