

A NEW HOME FOR NEW PLAYS

WOOLLY MAMMOTH THEATRE PRESENTS RAW WORK IN A RAW SPACE

BY DAVID BARBOUR



PHOTOS: JULIA HEINE

The Woolly Mammoth Theatre is designed to have ample social space, with room for cafés and a bookstall. Above, the translucent polycarbonate wall that divides the theatre and lobby glows with the light of PAR 38 halogen track heads.

Every theatre company wants a home of its own. But beware of what you wish for; the search for a workable venue can eat up years, millions of dollars, and all available nerve endings—and you might still end up with a white elephant. The deeper you get into the process, the more the demands multiply—a suitable location must be found, money must be raised (usually in buckets), and probing questions must be asked: Does this proposed building suit the company's artistic mission? What *is* the company's artistic mission? It's enough to make you want to lie down.

Nevertheless, if you are willing to tough it out, the benefits can be enormous. Washington, DC's Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company has braved the rapids, so to speak, arriving last summer at a new permanent home in one of the District's most up-and-coming neighborhoods. With 32,000 sq. ft. spread over three levels, it has room to grow. Best of all, the new theatre's design is an eloquent expression of its identity; it is immediately clear that this is a company dedicated to new and provocative work.

Woolly Mammoth is in the unusual position of being simultaneously venerable and cutting-edge. It's venerable in the sense that it is now in its 26th year, making it a DC institution. On the other hand, artistic director Howard Shalwitz is a practiced agent provocateur, always ready to take a chance on new, untried writers, many of whom don't mind shredding an audience sensibility or two. Among the playwrights championed by the theatre are Keith Reddin,

Wallace Shawn, Don DeLillo, Nicky Silver, Tim Miller, Amy Freed, David Lindsay-Abaire, Doug Wright and the late Harry Kondoleon.

The company's current season includes *After Ashley*, Gina Gionfriddo's prickly satire about tabloid tragedy and mass media; *Starving*, S. M. Shepard-Massat's drama about black women living in an Atlanta apartment building, circa 1950; *The Velvet Sky*, a dark fantasy by Robert Aguirre-Sacasa and a return engagement of Kiki and Herb, the take-no-prisoners cabaret act best described as Steve and Eydie just out of rehab. Clearly, this is a theatre company with a profile—and an edge.

At the same time, the company has reaped awards for its work, including nearly 100 Helen Hayes Award nominations for its productions and 16 Helen Hayes Awards, including five Charles MacArthur Awards for outstanding new play. Many Woolly Mammoth premieres have moved on to subsequent productions in New York and elsewhere.

For years, Woolly Mammoth operated out of a warehouse in the District's 14th Street neighborhood. Then it was officially homeless, dividing its seasons between venues at the Kennedy Center and Theater J, located at the city's Jewish Community Center. The story of how the theatre found its new home is filled with twists, but it's also a good example of how a creative team stayed on course—through many changes, challenges, and budget issues—by staying true to the client's identity.

Finding the space, making the match

"It was a tiny, 132-seat space with a ceiling height of 12' and a couple of columns to work around; the stage was a little wedge about 18' deep." That's how Howard Shalwitz describes Woolly Mammoth's original 14th Street venue. Lavish, it wasn't; still, he says, "It had a womblike feeling and a wonderful intensity about it. One of our goals was to hold onto that intensity—and to have the option of doing more visually impactful work." The latter is, he adds, a necessity, as many young playwrights, influenced by television and film, think in terms of visuals as well as words.

The idea of a new permanent home was first raised in 1993, says Shalwitz, with the search beginning in earnest a couple of years later. In the meantime, the company entered its years of wandering. As you can imagine, it wasn't easy to find a suitable venue that was both affordable and in an audience-friendly location. Then came the discovery of Federal Property Parcel 457C.

This oddly named entity was the final remaining piece of land from the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, which Shalwitz describes as "a quasi-Federal agency set up in the '60s to develop Pennsylvania Avenue, from the Capitol to the White House." Anyone building on Federal Property Parcel 457C was required to include 5,000 sq ft. of arts space, with a preference for live theatre. "It meant that any developer not willing to deliver a theatre wouldn't win the project," he adds.

One such developer, JPI, wanted to erect a condominium on the location. The building's architect, Phil Esocoff, was friendly with members of the Woolly Mammoth staff. After two-and-a-half years of negotiations, a match was made. "JPI cut us a great deal," says Shalwitz. "They're giving us the space for \$1 a year, for 30 years." In the meantime, the company mounted a \$7.5 million capital campaign. Then it was time to choose a theatre architect.

"We did a national search," says Shalwitz. "We got submissions from about 80 firms, some of which were very big and famous." However, the winner was McInturff Architects, based in Bethesda, Maryland. It was an interesting choice, as the firm is best-known for its residential work and, in fact, had never designed a theatre before.

The Piranesi concept

"My standard line is, the bad news is, I haven't done this kind of building before. The good news is, I haven't done this kind of building before," says architect Mark McInturff, laughing. He adds that his work "is all about being a good listener." He also says that he was very happy to have Theatre Projects Consultants onboard to help design the theatre.

"In his interview, McInturff blew everyone out of the water with his grasp of the three-dimensional challenges of the project," says Shalwitz. McInturff adds, "We looked closely at the kind of space that we were getting," noting that many challenges were immediately apparent: "The floor levels were complicated." Indeed they are; the venue, which opens onto the street, is largely underground, and is fitted around and beneath such condominium amenities as a courtyard and a parking garage.

But, in a sterling example of turning a drawback to one's advantage, McInturff used the space to create a dramatic entryway with plenty of social space. One enters into an unusually sunny and spacious box office area that features a café; the ground level also

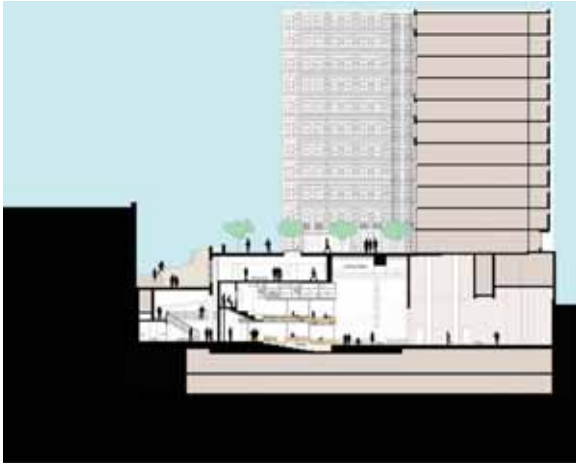


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The theatre's open levels and exposed stairways reveal the concept of a "transparent theatrical laboratory," as artistic director Howard Shalwitz calls it. "I kept saying the space is very Piranesian—long vistas with complex upward spaces," says architect Mark McInturff.



Section Through Theater



Lower Level

DRAWINGS: COURTESY OF MCINTURFF ARCHITECTS

contains the entrance to the auditorium's balcony level and the handicapped rest rooms. (Also on this floor is an open staircase that leads to the theatre's administrative offices.) One flight down is a mid-level area, featuring a bookstall, a second café, the entrance to the orchestra seats, and access to the backstage area, as well as the main rest rooms. One more flight down is a rehearsal hall and classrooms for the company's acting program. (Woolly Mammoth also has a relationship with the University of Maryland, involving classes and partnerships on certain productions.)

The advantages of this large, multi-level, combination lobby and workspace are many. "For me," says McInturff, "the wonderful constraint is that, because the space had to be built under the courtyard of the apartment building, well into the block, we got a 140' long lobby." For this reason, "the ritual of approach is dragged out and made manifest. It's the ultimate see-and-be-seen space."

Another plus, he says, is that the theatre's many functions are exposed to all: "The support spaces—rehearsal rooms, classrooms—are visible; there are people in there all day long." Shalwitz adds, "We had a phrase: 'transparent theatrical laboratory'. We really wanted the sense of seeing through into the rehearsal room. So far, we haven't put up any curtains during rehearsals. If people are there when the work is going on, they watch. Also, the box office doesn't have a glass divider. It's a unified space that's open and welcoming."

Interestingly, most of the space has been left in a fairly raw state: concrete walls and floors have not been treated, metal structures have been left exposed, ornamentation has been kept to a minimum. That's because, McInturff says, "They were very clear about how they wanted it to feel, although they didn't tell us how to make it feel that way. But they're known for raw and edgy work. The space we inherited was already raw and edgy, with a number of surfaces that some people thought we would cover up. For architectural and budget reasons, we didn't do that." Shalwitz adds, "A lot of things in the theatre were done out of financial necessity—but the unfinished concrete floors could have been sealed more beautifully." However, he says, "Mark had the aesthetic confidence to deal with the clash" between raw materials (the concrete) and more polished design elements, such as wooden panels.

One of the public area's most attention-getting aspects is the curving wall made of translucent polycarbonate that divides the theatre and the lobby. "We needed to reveal the theatre," says McInturff, who notes the polycarbonate is backlit to create a soft glow. Andrea Hartranft, of the architectural lighting firm C.M. Kling & Associates, says, "We ended up installing PAR 38 halogen track heads, two to a bay, at the top of the wall. There's reflective silver Mylar paper on the back wall; the light grazes along the Mylar and reflects off of it." The effect is brighter than you might think: "It's pret-

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ty extraordinary that you can shine down three stories with just a few units," she adds. A set of fuschia lenses are occasionally installed for a bit of color.

Overall, the combination of levels and exposed staircases is meant to foster a sense of continual discovery. "I kept saying, the space is very Piranesian—long vistas with complex upward spaces," says McInturff. Shalwitz adds, "About two-thirds of our space is one level below grade, but it doesn't feel like it, because it is so well-designed," thanks to the use of strategically placed lighting and cutaways that reveal the building's levels. Hartranft says the public areas are lit with a combination of compact fluorescent and incandescent "jelly jar" fixtures, as well as halogen track heads lighting the walls. "The beauty is," she says, "when you graze light on concrete, it really brings out the texture. We also have low-voltage track along the suspended ceiling plane that runs the entire length of the space, grazing the ceiling with shafts of light and softly illuminating the floor below."

The design process was complicated, McInturff says, because the condominium "was getting built as we were designing the theatre, and [the developers] made wholesale changes, with us on the receiving end. Plumbing would suddenly drop through a space that we didn't expect to see, for example. The theatre was never negotiable, but we had to be resilient. It was a little like dodging bullets."

An American courtyard

Inside the theatre, the space seats 265: 187 in the orchestra and 78 in the balcony, with additional standing room. The seats are placed in a courtyard arrangement; the theatre can be set up in an end-stage position or as a small thrust. The stage is 30' deep by 54' wide by 35' high, with a single-purchase counterweight rigging system for lighting and scenery, and three lighting catwalks located above the audience chamber. Stage rigging equipment for the theatre was supplied by J. R. Clancy; the truss was supplied by James Thomas Engineering and installed by Konstruct.

The space bears the unmistakable mark of Theatre Projects Consultants, the Norwalk, Connecticut and London-based firm that has long championed the courtyard concept. Shalwitz and McInturff were aware of TPC's preference for this configuration and were already at least halfway ready to accept it. Before the design process began, Shalwitz, McInturff, architectural associates Stephen Lawlor and Julia Heine, and Hana Sellers, the theatre's technical director, took a trip to London, where they viewed such TPC projects as The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the Royal Court, the Tricycle Theatre, and the National Theatre's Cottesloe. (McInturff adds he was influenced by a previous visit to the Georgian Theatre Royal founded in 1748 in the Yorkshire town of

Richmond.) The London trip "was valuable in terms of finding a shared language and goals," says Shalwitz.

Brian Hall, who headed the TPC team, says that the design of the Woolly Mammoth space was informed by Shalwitz's risk-taking artistic policy: "They're really edgy. Virtually every play is a premiere. They've moved into a more professional space, but they don't want to lose their vision."

Hall adds, "Working with Howard was fascinating because of his background in acting and directing. He is skilled in every area. Many people who promote new theatres aren't actors at all—they come from management and design. But he worries about inches, about contact between the theatre and the audience. For example, the stage height was an important discussion for him."

"Working with TPC," Shalwitz says, "I pushed for a slightly more tipped-up audience than they started with. Here, the audience steps up at 4 3/4" to start, and it goes up 1/4" each time to about 6 1/2". Also, the stage is 32" high. That little shift gives the space a more modern flavor. The goal was to take the courtyard and give a fresher, more contemporary feeling." Hall says the building "is a model that takes everything the Cottesloe offers and puts it in an American context. It's one of the best examples of an American courtyard theatre."

Opposite page, left and right: A cutaway view of the theatre and a floor plan for the theatre level. Right: the street entrance. Woolly Mammoth's new location is in one of the fastest-growing neighborhoods in the District's downtown area.



PHOTOS: JULIA HEINE



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Above, top and bottom: The auditorium seats 265 on two levels in a courtyard configuration. Consultant Brian Hall says that it “takes everything the Cottesloe [in London’s National Theatre] offers and puts it in an American context.”

Creating flexibility

Because the stage can be reconfigured, TPC designed a movable lighting truss for the front-of-house lighting position. It consists of three sections, each 10' with a 3' by 3' cross section. When assembled, the three sections span the 30' opening between auditorium galleries. Each face of the truss has a lighting pipe on standoff brackets equipped with half couplers. These pipes can be repositioned up and down, utilizing the half couplers. Two more lighting pipes are mounted to strut beneath the truss, allowing for easy repositioning of these two pipes upstage or downstage. The inside bottom of the truss is a walking surface, with 3' hinged panels that can be lifted up to access the lighting pipes mounted below.

The truss is raised and lowered by two chain motors, which are rigged to trolleys riding on beams on the underside of the ceiling above, allowing the truss to be manually positioned anywhere in a 14' zone at the front of the auditorium. Once the height and plan position are established, eight suspension cables are installed and short pipes with half couplers secure the truss ends to the side tech ledges. As a result, says Millie Dixon of TPC, “It works as a regular lighting truss that you can stand on and focus, and you can reposition it all the way to the first catwalk. It gives them an adjustable FOH lighting position with minimal pain.”

Dixon says there is room for 33 rigging linesets over the stage, although, at present, only 22 have been installed. In addition, a concrete transfer beam precluded the installation of conventional counterweight rigging sets in one location, so a 40' box truss (21 x 12) is placed there. The truss lifting brackets are made of 1/2" aluminum plate, with a hole pattern that allows the bracket to bolt up between the 10' truss sections or on the ends of the assembled truss. This eliminates the need for spansets, wire rope, or a clamp-on lifting bracket, providing a clean and simple attachment point for the chain motors that support it.

Also, because the theatre is located inside a high-rise development, travel for the counterweight system was extremely restricted. In

order to maximize the batten travel, TPC specified horizontal trimming devices in place of the conventional trim chain or batten clamp; this provides an additional 4" of travel over conventional means.

Dixon, who worked closely with Hana Sellers on the technical specifications, says, “The whole concept, from a technical point of view, was to give them enough parts and pieces that they can do anything they imagine.”

The lighting package was supplied by Barbizon. The theatre wanted to keep its current lighting board, an ETC Insight 2, so, says Dixon, “we did an interface to connect to new sets of dimmers, controls, house lights, work lights, DMX, and Ethernet patch panels. The lineup includes an ETC Net2 system, which is not currently in use but will be when the theatre upgrades its lighting console. There are two racks of Sensor dimmers for the theatrical and house lighting, and a Unison panel to control the house lights.

Sellers says Woolly Mammoth has been building a lighting inventory for some time and recently purchased some used gear. On the sound side, the company now owns SFX and SoundForge software, to create and edit complex sound sequences in-house.

Dixon says TPC worked closely with the theatre seating supplier Ducharme. “There are four different heights of chairs in the orchestra,” she says. “It was another way of working within the budget and the space—the first nine or ten rows are the standard size chair; in the parterre, they start getting higher.” She adds that although the chairs were purchased from Ducharme, which is based in Canada, the company has since signed a distribution agreement in the United States with Wenger.

Acoustical isolation

Just as everyone else involved in the project struggled with the issues raised by the theatre’s relationship to the larger building, so too did acoustician David Kahn. “There were so many issues,” he says. “There’s a parking garage directly under the theatre. There’s also a big dumpster, where they pick up garbage, located off stage right.

McInturff's design makes use of the contrast between raw materials, such as unfinished concrete, and more polished details, such as the wooden railing seen at right.



PHOTOS: JULIA HEINE

And then there's the outdoor garden, which has drains. We were promised that the drains wouldn't run through the theatre, but there they are."

Overall, says Kahn, "When I was first brought in, they hadn't started designing the theatre." However, he says, work had begun on the condominium. "The goal was for me to work with the base building architects and engineers to get some sound protection built into the base building. At first, they were cooperative, but then things began to change. Still, we won certain arguments dealing with the walls that make up the basic shell of the theatre. And we got space in the parking lot for the mechanical equipment. That was important, as it saved the theatre a lot of money."

So Kahn went to work to acoustically isolate the auditorium as much as possible. For example, the drains mentioned above are "wrapped in a special vinyl material that keeps all the noise inside the pipes. In the case of the garage below, because the theatre doesn't have a flat floor—it's stepped—rather than pouring the steps on the concrete floor of the base building, we provided a material to isolate the stepped slab from the floor below the ceiling of the garage."

Also, Kahn says, "The back wall of the theatre, starting at the balcony level, where the control room is located, has a wavy, perforated material, behind which is sound-absorbing material." However, "We wanted the room to have what I would describe as responsive acoustics,

to naturally amplify the spoken word, because the [Woolly Mammoth creative staff] doesn't like to use amplification. By shaping the theatre with wraparound balconies and getting the audience so close to the stage, you have a space with some acoustical life to it." About the courtyard configuration, he says, "The goal of visual intimacy goes hand in hand with our goal for aural intimacy. If Theatre Projects hadn't asked for it, we would have. With a theatre as visually/acoustically intimate as this, there was little need to add sound-absorbing finishes to control reverberation."

The HVAC equipment is placed below the auditorium; however, air is distributed into the room from above. "We were intimately involved in design of the air distribution plan," says Kahn, adding that, here, "the air is blown out of the ducts without diffusers, because they tend to make most of the noise. The design goal for the HVAC system was to operate silently, to maximize the available dynamic range of expression of the actors."

The supporting spaces

The scene shop is located directly behind the stage; a large set of double doors allows shows to load in quickly. Kahn says the doors are designed to provide some acoustical isolation. Certainly, the relationship of the scene shop to the rest of the theatre must be considered a bonus, as it facilitates easy load-ins.

Not that getting into the scene shop from the outside world is a simple matter. As Dixon points out, "They are below street level. If you can get a truck into the alley on the D Street side of the theatre, there's an elevator that can get you into the shop. The problem is that you can't really stop a truck on D Street. Also, we specified a 22' elevator and they ended up with an 16' version." An additional high door from the main building's loading dock helps them receive long building materials into the shop.

Anyway, there is room for support spaces. The backstage includes two dressing rooms, with an adjacent green room and kitchenette, production office, and bathrooms. In addition to the scenery shop, there is a work room, prop shop, wardrobe, laundry, and storage area. The upper level administrative suite includes a reception area, two private offices, an open workspace for 20 desks, a meeting room, and kitchenette.

Indeed, everyone seems to agree that, whatever compromises had to be made along the way, the result is highly workable and audience-friendly. It places the theatre in the center of town and provides it with an environment that clearly communicates its artistic mission. The company's literature makes the remarkable statement that its "long-range vision" is to become "the epicenter of challenging new theatre in America." Given its history and its new building, that goal may be closer than ever. 📶