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ATLANTIC THEATRE'S RESTORATION DRAMA

A theatre is taken apart and reassembled
in the name of renovation

By: David Barbour

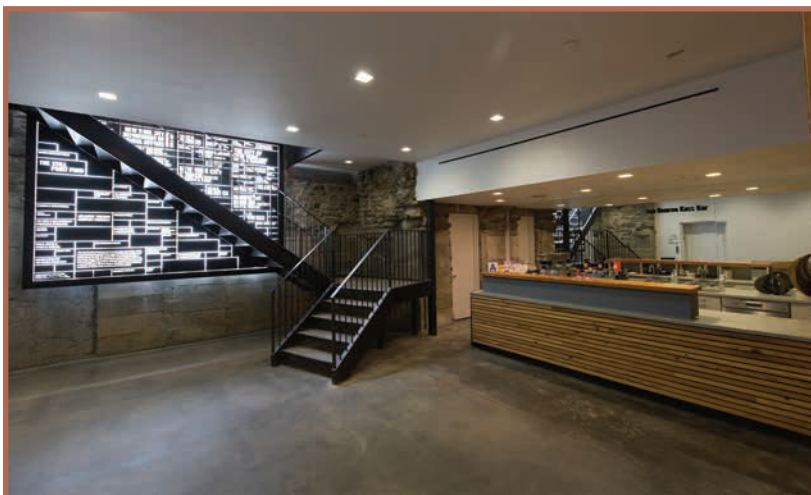


When the home base of a theatre company undergoes a renovation, the results are usually dramatically obvious—the auditorium might be visibly refurbished, the exterior thoroughly reworked, new performance spaces might be added. In the case of Atlantic Theatre Company's Linda Gross Theatre, none of this is true. Jeffery Lawson, the company's managing director, told *Playbill.com* that, when friends survey the interior of the Gross, they say, "What did you do? It looks the same." There is a good reason for this: The company spent \$8.3 million to make it so.

Founded in 1985 by a group of New York University graduates and their mentors David Mamet and William H. Macy, Atlantic Theatre Company has grown to become one of Off Broadway's premier production companies. Along the way, Atlantic has presented works by authors ranging from Woody Allen to George F. Walker, a distinguished list that also includes Craig Lucas, John Guare, Tina Howe, Keith Reddin, Ethan Coen, and, of course, David Mamet. The company has been instrumental in promoting the fortunes in the US of Conor McPherson, Jez Butterworth, and Martin McDonagh. The latter's black comedies *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* are among the Atlantic



Thin strips of blond wood, here seen on the wall containing the box office and the auditorium's two entryways, help give the lobby a contemporary feel.



The building's exposed foundation contrasts with the façade of the concession stand, which features the same blond wood strips seen on the box office.

productions that have transferred to Broadway; the company also presented the New York premiere of the musical *Spring Awakening* before its smash Broadway run. In addition, it has presented revivals of vintage works such as *Hobson's Choice*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Once in a Lifetime*, *Three Sisters*, and *Dangerous Corner*. Atlantic also runs an influential acting school, which is affiliated with NYU.

For nearly 23 years, Atlantic Theatre has been located in a circa-1850 parish house on a pleasant, leafy street in New York's Chelsea district. Leased from the adjacent St. Peter's Church, the building had many advantages: It was located in an attractive and desirable neighborhood only minutes from Midtown; it featured a good-sized auditorium; and its historic charm made it seem the very essence of a classic Off Broadway theatre. (The building had been in use as a theatre for many years; previous tenants included the Apple Corps Theatre, performance artist Meredith Monk, and the avant-garde company Mabou Mines.)

The building's many defects included a cramped lobby, a dearth of ancillary spaces, a shortage of backstage space, not terribly comfortable seating—and, worst of all, restrooms located backstage. This nightmarish arrangement placed the actors and audience members in uncomfortable proximity and meant that restrooms were inaccessible once the performance began. There were other problems, too: Mary McCann, a member of the company, told *Playbill.com*, "You could hear people talking during intermission about the show. It was right there, because the greenroom for the actors was attached to the restroom. You had to run upstairs to get away from the talk."

Clearly, something needed to be done, and, just as clearly, nobody was in favor of seeking out another venue. "We needed to make the



The number of seats has been increased from 160 to 199; the supplier was Irwin Seating, of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

theatre more user-friendly,” says Lawson, who adds that, as the building’s exterior was landmarked, changes could not be made to it. Inside, however, was a different matter. “There were many deficiencies,” says Douglas Stebbins, of Fisher Dachs Associates, the theatre consultant on the project. “The problem wasn’t the auditorium; it was the rest of the building. There was no lobby space. There was no shop and poor access to the stage; they had to

build sets in the theatre.” The building was also non-ADA-compliant. Having secured a second stage and administrative offices in a nearby location in 2006, Atlantic’s staff and management turned their attention to bringing the Linda Gross Theatre up to date. As mentioned above, despite its much-improved functioning, many of the changes are invisible; in a way, the theatre hasn’t been renovated so much as it has gotten a first-class face-lift.

Reconstruction

Working with Coburn Architecture, the project architects; Denham Wolf Real Estate Services, which oversaw construction; and Fisher Dachs, Atlantic implemented a plan that basically involved taking the building apart and putting it back together. Fisher Dachs consulted on the development of a program, walking the theatre’s staff through various studies focusing on issues such as seating, sightlines, and costs. The process

ARCHITECTURE



The back wall of the theatre was moved 9', which also required the removal of a supplementary building that stood in the way.



Photo: Nelson Hancock



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included intensive consultation with many of the designers who have worked there—among them the set designers Santo Loquasto, Riccardo Hernandez, and Walt Spangler—as well as stage managers and other technical staff. “Neil Pepe [the theatre’s artistic director] and an intern polled all the designers,” says Stebbins, who notes that all sorts of issues were on the table: Should a permanent stage be installed? Should there be traps? Should there be a permanent lighting grid?

One major imperative was to get more space; the original building had no functional basement and the backstage area was cramped. Therefore, the decision was taken to gut the interior, underpin the building, and dig 14' into the ground, an effort that took seven months. In addition, the back wall of the theatre was taken out and moved back 9'. “The work was slow and delicate,” McCann told *Playbill.com*, “since the workers had to protect and secure the building’s underpinnings. For a year, it looked

like nothing was happening.” Inside the building, as the photos on page 47 show, plenty was happening. Also, the movement of the building’s back wall required the removal of the small structure behind the theatre—Stebbins calls it “the infill building”—that stood in the way.

New spaces

In this way, the Linda Gross Theatre was enlarged without altering its essential structure. Entering the theatre, one is immediately aware of the expanded lobby space, now on two levels. The renovated ground-floor lobby is much more spacious and airy, with an enlarged box office. Gone is the overhanging structure that was the lighting booth. The wall that contains the box office and the auditorium’s two entryways is covered with thin strips of blond wood, giving the room a more contemporary feel. Opposite the box office is a unique twist on the donor wall concept, a light box featuring the names of everyone who has donated

\$5,000 or more for the theatre’s renovation; it extends all the way down into the new basement area. The addition of wheelchair ramps and an elevator, which goes from the basement up into the auditorium, allow for disabled access.

Altogether, the theatre has gained 5,100 sq. ft. of basement space, which is reached via a black steel staircase. “It’s very tough and industrial-looking, and it’s set in right up against a section of old foundation, an old foundation wall, so it’s a really beautiful contrast of the old and the new,” said Jon Denham, of Denham Wolfe, in an interview with *The Commercial Observer*. Forming a contrast with the rock walls of the building’s exposed foundation is the façade of the concession stand, which features the same blond wood strips seen on the box office. The fully equipped concession stand is a vast improvement of the tiny, ad hoc setup it has replaced; the new restrooms are light years better than their predecessors. Also located downstairs are



a costume shop (complete with washers and dryers), a prop-building shop, an IT room, and offices for technical staff.

The invisible renovation

Inside the auditorium, “The key was to retain the beauty of the space,” Lawson says. Even though to the casual eye it might appear as if nothing has been altered, many changes have been implemented. The number of seats has been increased from 160 to 199; the new, and much more comfortable, burgundy seating was supplied by Irwin Seating. The rake of the audience has been adjusted for improved sightlines, and the spacing makes for an altogether better viewing experience. New

custom seating lights provide additional aid for patrons. The windows, which were previously covered with drapes, now have brown fitted frames that unobtrusively fit in with the overall look of the room. (“They went through three or four mockups of window coverings,” says Stebbins.) HVAC ducts have been removed from their previous overhead position and repositioned in ducts off the stage, thus eliminating an unsightly distraction. The expanded space is now 6,300 sq. ft.

The stage area has been expanded, thanks to the relocated upstage wall, which also required extending the auditorium’s peaked roof. Dressing rooms retain their traditional location above the stage; they

consist of one rather large area that can be reconfigured using a curtain. The dressing room area has been repainted and has acquired new lighting. The removal of the backstage restrooms means that, for the first time, additional wing space is available. (The new stage area is 30’ wide and 40’ deep, or about the size of the stage in a small Broadway house.) A new doorway, located upstage, allows for the easy installation of scenery; previously, scenery had to be handed through a small side window. A stage trap has been added, allowing for the possibility of entrances from below the stage, and a door placed high on the upstage wall allows for staircases entrances, if needed. An upstage crossover has been included, along with a new greenroom and an additional office.

Interestingly, the decision was taken not to add a permanent stage. The designers who consulted on the project by and large said they preferred the flexibility afforded by the need to build a set from the ground up. A set of steel, installed by Pook Diemont & Ohl in 1991, remains in place, allowing for the installation of adjustable lighting rigs.

The auditorium ceiling was repainted and new lighting positions were added, with input from many of the company’s lighting designers. “The previous jerry-rigged positions have been replaced by box booms, with additional outlets on the side walls,” says Joe Mobilia, associate principal at Fisher Dachs. “There is also a sort-of balcony rail position under the booth.” The dimmer room for the lighting equipment has been installed in a second-floor gallery; previously, it was located just about the stage manager’s booth, which made the latter uncomfortably hot. “They kept blowing circuits,” Mobilia says. “They had three portable air-conditioning units in there during the summer.” The new booth, which is accessed by ship’s ladder, is more



The effort of digging a basement for the theatre took seven months, but it resulted in 5,100 sq. ft. of basement space that now houses restrooms, a concession stand, a costume shop, a prop building shop, an IT room, and offices for technical staff.

spacious and offers a good view of the stage.

The house lighting package, consisting of ETC gear supplied by Barbizon, includes two ETC Sensor SR48 dimmer racks (192 dimmers total, one ETC SmartSwitch Relay Panel with twenty-four 120V circuits and twenty-four 208V circuits.) Faceplates with Socapex power and Ethernet receptacles, located in the rafters of the ceiling, are designed for maximum flexibility of fixture locations, as the company often

reconfigures its lighting grid. There are two ETC one-port DMX nodes, four ETC two-port DMX nodes, as well as ETC Paradigm house light controls and Lex Products company switches. The company already owned an ETC Ion console.

The Atlantic Theatre reopened in October with a ceremony that, among other things, featured Macy and his wife, Felicity Huffman, another founding member, strumming ukuleles and singing each title of the 130 plays previously

produced by the company. So far, the transition to life in the renovated space has proven remarkably seamless. “We never expected we would be here this long,” Pepe told the Associated Press. “When we realized we were going to be here this long, we wanted to make this beautiful space even better, and we wanted to make it more hospitable to the artists, the patrons, the audiences, and the community.” 📶