



THE NEW COLONIAL ERA BEGINS



A jewel from the heyday of Broadway tryouts returns, newly polished

By: David Barbour

What has turned out to be one of the great-last-minute rescues in American theatre came to a happy conclusion when Boston's Colonial Theatre—renamed the Emerson Colonial Theatre—presented the pre-Broadway production of the musical *Moulin Rouge!* The event marked a triumph for one of America's most beautiful theatres, which, not too long ago, was marked for destruction.

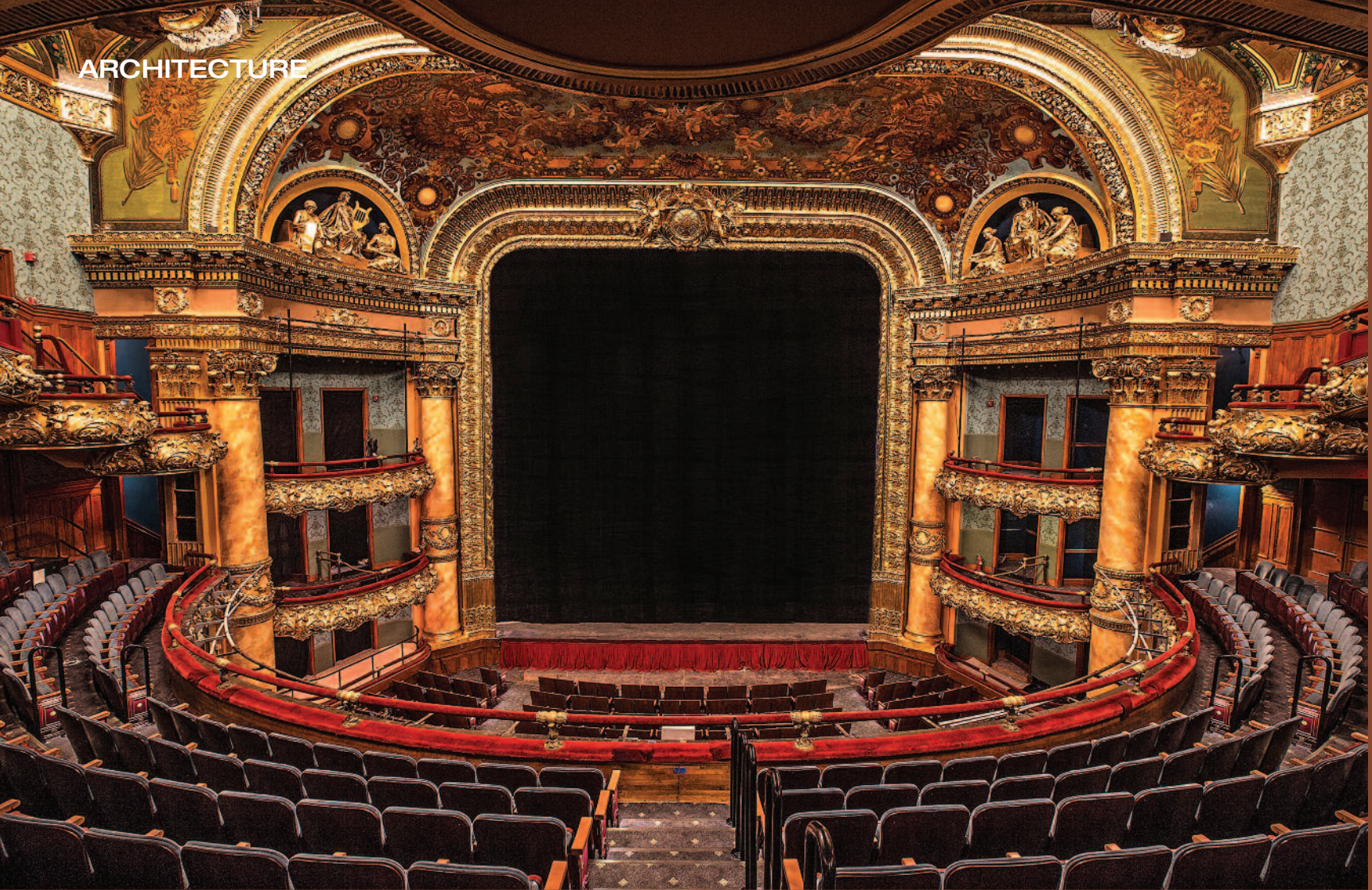
To understand why this would have been such a tragedy, consider the place of the Colonial in theatre history. Designed by the architect Clarence H. Blackall—who was responsible for nearly a dozen venues, including the still-existing Ye Wilbur Theatre, in the city's heyday of live entertainment—and designer Henry Barrett, it instantly became a premier playhouse. According to *Architectural Digest*, it "brought the best of Baroque Europe under one roof, reproducing elements of Versailles and the Louvre."

The Colonial opened in 1900 with a production of *Ben-Hur*, which required the services of a company of 350, plus eight horses for the chariot race. In the days when cities such as Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, and others along the Atlantic Seaboard formed a network where shows routinely went for shakedown runs before opening on Broadway, the Colonial was a prime destination. The first touring edition of *The Ziegfeld Follies* visited in 1907. The George and Ira Gershwin musical *Lady, Be Good!* tried out there in 1925, as did *Porgy and Bess*, a decade later. In the 1930s, Cole Porter and company brought in such musical hits as *Anything Goes* and *Red, Hot, and Blue!* Following the run of a little piece titled *Away We Go*—later known as *Oklahoma!*—Rodgers and Hammerstein visited often, bringing shows such as *Carousel*. Also in the 1940s, *Lady in the Dark* and *On the Town* prepped themselves for Broadway; in 1946, the movie star Jean Arthur departed a comedy playing at the Colonial titled *Born Yesterday*; on arrival in New York, the show was a blockbuster and Arthur's replacement, Judy Holliday, instantly became a star. Neil Simon's 1965 comedy *The Odd Couple* underwent a tumultuous engagement as the playwright struggled, ultimately successfully, to perfect the play's third act.

In the postwar years, many groundbreaking shows tried out at the Colonial, including musicals like *Promises, Promises*; *Follies*; and *A Little Night Music*. (Ted Chapin's book, *Everything Was Possible*, offers a highly detailed

Photos: Todd Kaplan

All photos: Patrick Farrell



No less a personage than Stephen Sondheim has praised the Colonial for its beautiful interior and first-rate acoustics, both of which have made it a prime venue for musicals undergoing pre-Broadway tryouts.

look at the dramatic run of *Follies* in Boston.) During the 1970s and early '80s, I lived in the area and saw many shows at the Colonial, among them *The Innocents*, starring Claire Bloom and 12-year-old Sarah Jessica Parker; the musical *On the Twentieth Century*, starring John Cullum, Madeline Kahn, and Imogene Coca; *Woman of the Year*, starring Lauren Bacall; and *La Cage aux Folles*. It remains the most glamorous theatre I've ever seen.

In the ensuing years, however, the process by which Broadway shows were created underwent a sea of change; instead of going to two or three cities, making changes on the fly, a lengthy development process, consisting of readings and workshop stagings, took precedence. Without a steady lineup of new productions in the pipeline, the Colonial, like many others, was dark much of the time, opening only for the occasional national tour. The theatre was renovated in the 1990s, but, in 1998, the owner, Jon Platt, sold the building to SFX (later known as Live Nation). Emerson College purchased it in 2006, leasing to other presenting entities; in 2015, the college

announced plans to turn the Colonial into a student dining hall. By then, the theatre was open for an average of 61 days a year, according to Lee Pelton, president of Emerson; nevertheless, an outcry followed, fueled by Stephen Sondheim, who told *Boston* magazine, "I've had shows which tried out in the Colonial, and it's not only beautiful but acoustically first-rate, two qualities which are rare in tandem, even on Broadway. For those of us involved in musical theatre, it's a treasure and to tear it down would be not only a loss, but something of a crime."

Eventually, cooler heads prevailed and, in 2017, Emerson made a deal with Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG) for a 40-year lease. A UK-based organization, ATG has made inroads into the US, in New York taking over the much-maligned Lyric Theatre (now host to the blockbuster hit *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*) and renovating and reopening the Hudson Theatre. Part of the deal involved ATG and Emerson collaborating financially on substantial capital improvements. The resulting renovation, by Elkus Manfredi Architects and the theatre consultancy Schuler



The lobby consciously recalls the Palace of Versailles. The carpeting is by Brintons, the UK-based company that originally supplied the theatre in 1900.

Shook, is stunning, restoring the Colonial's gilded detail to dazzling effect. With a new business plan that will combine longer runs of tryouts and touring Broadway shows with a broad variety of short engagements and one-offs, management is poised to keep the theatre filled on a regular basis. As we go to press, the upcoming calendar features lengthier engagements of *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* and *The Play That Goes Wrong* along with one- or two-performance runs by Daughtry, Heather Headley, Mannheim Steamroller, Lord of the Dance, Rufus Wainwright, and *The Hip Hop Nutcracker*.

Erica Lynn Schwartz, the Colonial's general manager, notes that when the renovation began, the theatre was "certainly not in the best shape. I joined [ATG] in July of last year and, even on my first day, you couldn't deny the beauty of the Colonial. But paint had been chipped off the walls and the plaster needed repair. There were also a lot of errant wires. The orchestra seats were in a pile on the floor. Dust was everywhere. The carpeting was in massive need of an overhaul."

The renovation

Michael DiBlasi, of Schuler Shook, notes that work was needed to bring the theatre up to contemporary standards. "The seating and ADA accommodations were problematic, so we did a lot to rake and reseat the main orchestra level; in the two balconies, we cleaned and reupholstered the seating. We also created better ADA seating capabilities." Irwin Seating supplied the new seats on the orchestra level. (Schwartz notes that a seat was removed from each row, widening the main aisles for better access.) The ADA-related changes extend to the backstage area, too, Schwartz notes: "We gained a bathroom on the stage and gutted the dressing room wing; we now have two complete ADA dressing rooms and an ADA-compliant bathroom on the stage level, which really benefits the chorus girl with a dressing room on the fourth floor." In general, the seating is roomier.

A major brief, DiBlasi says, "was not only to accommodate larger touring productions, where they need power, rigging points, and support spaces, but also to facilitate

one-nighters with in-house production equipment to easily accommodate smaller shows. We made sure production crew have better positions for tables and access to power and infrastructure. There are new front-of-house positions for lighting and sound consoles—and we fixed the balcony rail positions and provided more power and data throughout the building.”

Discussing what were probably the biggest structural changes to the building, DiBlasi says, “Stage left was the dressing room tower and that area needed some significant work. The dressing room tower was stripped down to the walls and reconfigured to provide better rooms, access, and finishes; they can now serve a large cast for Broadway and also smaller groups.” Echoing Schwartz, he notes, “There are two dressing rooms on the stage level and a reworked stage left wing to improve ADA access, dressing areas, and storage.” Schwartz adds, “The trap room and the pit are the same. We also have a new production suite with a laundry room, hair and wig room, and a large room that can be broken up into three smaller spaces. Again, the key is flexibility. Every show is different,

has different needs. What are we doing to meet them? And make it attractive with the limited space we have?”

“The biggest challenge was the gridiron,” DiBlasi says. “It was a hemp house with sandbags and tons of sand in the galleries and a grid with 2 x 2 square wood slats. We installed a new steel gridiron and double-purchase counterweight sets for the main stage rigging, with the loft blocks raised to enable the grid to be used for show-specific rigging.” JR Clancy was responsible for the rigging installation, he adds. “We put in more rigging for front-of-house trusses, as well as left and right loudspeaker arrays.”

One plus factor, DiBlasi says, is “the power service was in place, so we could focus the dollars on a new ETC dimming and data system,” supplied by Boston-based High Output. House lighting and sound systems were specified, to accommodate the widest possible range of touring acts. Sound gear was supplied by SAVI, based in Clifton Park, New York.

The most obvious change is the restoring of the interior to its original color scheme, which, most recently—and for





Above: The lounge on the orchestra level contains a table allegedly scuffed by Bob Fosse trying out a tap routine. Opposite: The grand staircase. Below: The auditorium has been returned to its original blue color scheme.

decades—was red. However, Schwartz says, “We were tipped off by the Boston Landmarks Commission, who told us that red was not the original color. When the John Tiedemann Company [plaster repair specialists] came in, they were going to patch and repair most of the inside theatre walls, not paint it a different color. But there was so much damage in the walls with cracks, they said it might be more efficient to repair and paint. We took a chip off the wall, and that’s when we found the original color and took that sample to the BLC and got their approval. I don’t know how they knew it was not red, but they knew.” The interior is now described by the *Boston Globe* as “cerulean blue with a hand-stenciled overlay.” Schwartz also told the *Globe*, “It makes so much sense: The ceiling has always been turquoise and blue, but the walls were red, so now it’s more cohesive.”

Also, she says, “We went to Brintons, the company in the UK that did the original carpets. They didn’t have the files for the Colonial but, with forensic architecture work, learned that architects of the time would use repeating patterns. There are grates for air return and additional design details in the millwork around the walls. Brintons had carpeting with these patterns in them. So, we took the patterns from those carpets and created a custom carpet. In the big lobby, there are huge oval mirrors, and we emulate that pattern as well.”

According to the *Globe*, “Crews have spent more than 37,000 man-hours repairing murals, recreating plaster molds, retouching gold leaf, lofting a new marquee, and installing some 42,000 sq. ft. of carpet.” Schwartz adds that during the renovation, a long-running debate involved making the theatre look brand-new versus giving it a pati-

na of history. The resulting compromise tends toward the glittering, but there are still evocative details to be found, including the table in the ladies’ lounge where Bob Fosse allegedly danced a tap routine, leaving behind chips in the surface.

Schwartz adds that, as time goes by, she only becomes more aware of the Colonial’s significance. “What you learn working here is that there are so many amazing stories and a strong affinity for the venue. I’ve worked in a couple of other markets and I have never seen that or felt that. We’re just really grateful to be the next shepherds of the building.”

