





# THE HUDSON TAKES A BOW

Inside Broadway's newest vintage theatre

By: David Barbour

The Broadway community received a gleaming new/old gift this spring with the reopening of the Hudson Theatre. Since its 1903 debut, with Ethel Barrymore starring in a comedy titled *Cousin Kate*, the Hudson, located on West 44th Street, between Seventh and Sixth Avenues, has played host to premieres by Somerset Maugham, Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, and Lillian Hellman, starring, among others, Judith Anderson, Van Heflin, Maureen Stapleton, Laurence Olivier, Jason Robards Jr., Jane Fonda, and Geraldine Page. The theatre has had many lives since in the following decades; its return provides Broadway with a much-needed additional house for intimate drama and musicals. As a bonus, its new owner, the London-based Ambassador Theatre Group, appears determined to keep the Hudson busy. The theatre reopened in March, with a limited-engagement revival of the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Annaleigh Ashford. It will be followed by a stage adaptation of George Orwell's *1984*, a transfer from London's Almeida Theatre, starring Tom Sturridge, Olivia Wilde, and Reed Birney.

Originally designed by William H. McElfatrick, a noted turn-of-the-last-century theatre architect, the Hudson was built by Henry B. Harris, a successful producer, who also was responsible for the Fulton Theatre, later known as the Helen Hayes, on 46th Street. Harris kept the Hudson Theatre filled for nine years, until, in 1912, on a return trip from England, he went down with the

## ARCHITECTURE

Titanic. His wife, René, survived that seagoing disaster; taking over the family business, she continued to present new productions at the Hudson until 1927. (At the time, she was one of a very few female Broadway producers.) During the Depression, she lost control of the theatre; by 1934, CBS had purchased it, operating it as a radio studio. In the 1940s, it was bought by Lindsay and Crouse, who kept it well-supplied with notable productions, including the blockbuster farce *Arsenic and Old Lace* and their own smash hit, the political comedy *State of the Union*. The year 1949 was a valedictory of sorts: The Hudson hosted *Detective Story*, by Sidney Kingsley, one of the era's signa-



Weihs installed the double-purchase counterweight line set system.

ture hits.

In 1950, however, the theatre was purchased by NBC and renovated into a television studio, where it housed the variety shows *Broadway Open House* and *The Kate Smith Hour* before serving as the home of *The Tonight Show* under the successive reigns of hosts Steve Allen and Jack Paar. Among its claims to fame during this period, the Hudson was the site of Elvis Presley's first television performance.

The Hudson was returned to theatrical use in 1960, and, for a time, attracted prestige bookings, including the hit family drama *Toys in the Attic*, by Lillian Hellman; *Ross*, a Terence Rattigan drama about T. E. Lawrence, starring

John Mills; and the Actors Studio revival of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. As the 1960s wore on, however, bookings became few and far between, leading to its 1968 closing after the four-performance run of a comedy titled *Mike Upstairs*; it was then purchased by the Avon chain of adult film houses. (Avon also purchased the Henry Miller Theatre—now the Stephen Sondheim—located one block away; neither event added luster to a Times Square District that was slipping into a state of decay.) In 1980, it was converted to the Savoy nightclub for a brief run. The theatre's interior and exterior were given landmark status in 1987; around this time, the developer Harry Macklowe,



The seating stanchions feature the iconic hexagon that can be seen throughout the renovated theatre.

who was building the Millennium Hotel next door, incorporated the Hudson in his plans, using it as the hotel's conference center.

And there the Hudson remained until 2015, when Ambassador Theatre Group purchased it. ATG hired the firm Martinez+Johnson Architecture as well as the theatre and acoustical consultant firm Charcoalblue to work on the restoration of the Hudson, with EverGreene Architectural Arts brought onboard to help restore the interior. All three firms worked with ATG's COO Erich Jungwirth and George Couyas, ATG's head of interior design. (Also involved were Yorke Construction, Goldman Copeland Engineering, and McLaren Engineering.) This team has restored the theatre



The auditorium has side aisles at the back and a continental layout down front, a strategy to get extra seats on the orchestra floor. The seats, supplied by the UK-based firm, Kirwin & Simpson, are among the most comfortable in New York.

to its former glory while upgrading its technical facilities and adding new amenities that make it one of the most luxurious of Broadway houses.

### **Restoring the interior**

The Hudson presents a relatively modest face to the world, its Beaux-Arts-style exterior done in brick and limestone, with an attractive steel-and-glass marquee that replicates the look of the original. (By a hair, the Hudson is now the oldest operating theatre on Broadway, having opened a month before the Lyceum, located a block away on 45th Street.) The building's upper two floors, which once contained the Harris' office and living quarters, are, at least for

now, sealed off. Attractive new signage provides a fine display for the theatre's current attraction.

Once inside the theatre, however, a sense of opulence prevails. Stewart Jones, New York City principal with Martinez+Johnson Architecture, notes that, unusually, the building's footprint expands the width of the block, from West 44th to West 45th St. This allowed for the creation of a two-part lobby that is larger than that of any other Broadway theatre by several degrees; both spaces are uncommonly beautiful.

Couyas, whose brief is to continually upgrade and update ATG's 40-plus venues (many, if not all, of which are in the West End), describes how he worked with the archi-



The Tiffany Bar is so named for the stunning glass domes designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

tectural and consultant team, says, “We started by looking at the landmark preservation document, which talks about the original color scheme. When we first looked at the Hudson [when still configured as a convention center], there were red carpets, red drapes, and red seats. The original 1903 design scheme featured a very dark green with bronze and golds; the original seats were dark green velvet with gold tassels. We used this as a starting point for the design.”

Clemeth Abercrombie, of Charcoalblue, adds, “As soon as I got in there, I saw that it was a really nice house; the bones of the place were good.”

Jones says that the two lobby areas constitute the the-

atre’s “neck,” a 100’-long corridor, leading to the auditorium. The exterior lobby features the box office, a neo-classical structure in dark green marble decorated with bronze heads of Hermes. Jones says that this original structure has largely been left alone, except for the removal of a door, and the opening up of an adjoining entrance that now provides access to an elevator that may be used by disabled patrons. The ceiling in this lobby originally had a tiny light bulb in each of its hundreds of coffers; these were replaced, during the Millennium Hotel era, by a chandelier.

The hand-woven Axminster carpet in the lobby, which extends into the auditorium, features a hexagonal pattern

that is seen repeatedly throughout the theatre. Couyas says, “We wanted a little motif that could become part of the design and also the theatre’s branding. There’s a beautiful hexagonal honeycomb pattern that is part of the theatre’s proscenium arch. Although the theatre comes from an earlier period than art deco, there’s a kind of geometric nature to it; we picked up on it for the carpet, seating stanchions, mirrors, and also for the theatre’s logo.” (It is prominently featured on the theatre’s website, [thehudsonbroadway.com](http://thehudsonbroadway.com).)

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Next comes the Tiffany Lobby Bar, so named because of the stunning glass ceiling domes designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. The room features the green-and-bronze palette mentioned earlier. “When we started,” Jones says, “the lobby’s decor was entirely overpainted in light gray. It was restored to its current gilded look by Jeff Greene.” The domes, which had been hidden for years by new construction, were revealed during an earlier renovation in 2005; this time around, the glass was removed, piece by piece, and cleaned by hand.

The bar, however, is new, and was designed to fit in the style of the room and to win approval from NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission. “When the theatre opened, it was quite famous for its use of diffused light,” Couyas says. “We designed a 2017 take on that.” He’s referring to the use of Marblo, a polymer-based hybrid material that looks like marble, but, when backlit, creates a softly diffused look. Jones points out another amenity: a long rail on the wall opposite the bar where pre-ordered intermission drinks can be picked up by patrons.

Both Abercrombie and Jones note that, originally, the Tiffany Lobby Bar opened to the auditorium; this was not considered acceptable, from an acoustical standpoint. “We built a wall to create an acoustic separation,” Abercrombie

says, adding, “The outside doors of the theatre were made of wood, so we replaced them with doors that make an acoustically tight seal.” Charcoalblue also advised on noise control for MEP systems to keep the theatre quiet.

The auditorium is done in a kind of cream white, with the original Tiffany blue and gold glass tile built into the fascias of the mezzanine and balcony as well part of as the auditorium’s walls. Rather than return to the original green-and-bronze color scheme, Couyas says, “There was a conversation where we decided not to fully redecorate the auditorium.” However, he adds, “We did a great deal of restoration, allowing us to complete the story that had been exposed by the Millennium [during the 2005 renovation]. We went over areas where the paint was chipped or



This detail of the auditorium shows its elaborate molding and diffused lighting.

damaged, cleaning it up and exposing it more, bringing it back to its former glory. It is so rare to have that Tiffany glass used as décor in an auditorium.” This effort was led by Greene and his staff at EverGreene Architectural Arts.

The auditorium’s side boxes are framed by Ionic columns. Jones notes that the original boxes were removed in the 1950s, and it was decided not to replace them, given their unattractive sightlines. The upper box areas are now used for lighting positions, and the lower areas are used as service points for ATG’s in-seat food and beverage offering.

Part of auditorium’s coffered ceiling features another iteration of the hexagonal pattern, with 300 miniature

chandeliers that were very much in need of restoration. From below, this feature looks like a constellation of lights; seen close up, the bulbs are surrounded by tiny pieces of hanging glass that refract the light around the room. “Some of the chandeliers were broken and needed relamping and rewiring,” says Couyas. “They create a halo at the top of the auditorium.”

Also, Abercrombie says, “The orchestra floor had been replaced with three flat tiers. We restored the original rake and took a good look at the sight lines.” The seating layout is unique for Broadway; the back of the orchestra floor contains side aisles, but the front of the room is arranged in a continental layout. “We were looking for a way to get more seats in there,” Abercrombie says. “The original feasibility study had seating at 700, which is what it had as a convention center; we got it to 970.”

Surprisingly, given the increased numbers, the Hudson arguably has the most comfortable theatre seats in New York, with an enviable amount of leg room. Couyas says that ATG regularly works with UK-based seating manufacturer Kirwin & Simpson: “We wanted the widest chairs possible without sacrificing seating capacity.” Jones, adding, “There’s nothing like them in the US,” says that the use of a wood frame for each seat back provides strong support. Couyas concurs, adding, “They use a material called ProBax, a foam-based material that is also used in making luxury cars. It gives you a more upright sitting position; the seats are not as loungy, but, by sitting upright, you have more leg room.” He adds that the fabric for the seats, which are done in light antique gold, was created by the UK firm Sunbury Design, and manufactured in Belgium. At the end of each row are custom stanchions featuring the iconic hexagon.

### Bringing systems up to date

The team took a hard look at the theatre’s rigging and technical capabilities, which needed updating to accommodate today’s productions. Abercrombie says, “The theatre had a steel grid and remnants of a hemp fly system plus a handful of double-purchase counterweight line sets. The task was how to make it into a viable Broadway stage house.”

He adds, “We concluded that a double-purchase counterweight line set system was the right one. There are 34 new line sets running upstage/downstage over the stage floor area.” The rigging and drapery specialist iWeiss, using its proprietary Align rigging hardware, installed the line sets. To make room for the system, a stacked series of dressing rooms at stage right was removed. “We also blew out some walls and put in rack rooms and an electrical room,” Abercrombie says, adding that a new set of dressing rooms was installed in the basement. iWeiss also installed a new fire curtain with its own fire stop and fire release station plus a custom grand curtain and valance,



Each piece of glass in the domes was removed and cleaned by hand.



The auditorium features Tiffany glass tile as part of its décor.

along with house draperies.

Abercrombie says that new box boom ladders were installed in the upper level box areas, along with a front lighting pipe on the balcony level. “We also created new strong points for motor fames in the attic, to create two new front-of-house positions,” he says. “The existing truss position at the proscenium was turned into a speaker position.”

The theatre’s lighting system underwent a considerable revamp as well. “Originally, the intention was to maintain



The box office window is framed by two heads of Hermes.



The Axminster carpet introduces the hexagon motif as one enters from the street.

all house lighting as it was,” says Abercrombie. “As we proceeded through design phases, the Ambassador Theatre Group became interested in more energy efficiency and less maintenance on the lighting fixtures and sockets themselves.” This led to a complete retrofit of the house lighting with historical replica LEDs, the addition of LED work lights, and a new incandescent running light system.

With so many different types of lighting (incandescent and LED fixtures backstage, dimmable LEDs, line-voltage

controlled lighting, and low-voltage lights in the lobby and auditorium), the theatre needed an adaptable, yet comprehensive, control system, not to mention the strict standards an emergency lighting system required for public spaces. “There were a vast array of different systems that needed to function, and we wanted one system that could control and program all of them,” says Joel Brukner, project manager for Yorke Construction Company, the general contractor.

To address these requirements, two ETC DRd12 dimmer racks were installed to provide power for house and backstage lights, with control coming from two members of ETC’s Unison family of architectural controls, a Paradigm architectural control module, and Echo power modules and control stations.

ETC’s Echo products were chosen to provide power and control to the house lights without adding a lot of infrastructure. “ETC’s Echo controllers gave us a good way to add multiple cost-effective non-dim circuits without having to install a full relay panel,” says Scott Reagan, project manager of the install for supplier Barbizon Lighting. In addition to the variety of Echo wall station offerings, ETC’s Echo Access app allows one to change lights from anywhere in the building, plus the ability to lock out control stations during shows.

“Adding Echo Access let us give the head electrician wireless access to the work lights / running lights that live on the Echo rack from anywhere in the Hudson,” Reagan says. “It also gave him a way to easily reprogram the button as he sees fit over time. Plus, he was fairly excited about the lockout feature while the show is running.” In terms of emergency lighting, the Hudson is the first theatre to use ETC’s new six-channel DMX emergency bypass controller, the DEBC-6. This multi-output version simplifies wiring, yet adheres to the UL-924 code for emergency lighting systems.

In addition, Staging Concepts supplied a pit filler system consisting of cut-to-fit, carpet-ready SC90 platforms with black powder coated frames and 2" acoustic insulation on the underside. The pit filler system is supported by steel ledger angles on the audience side, along with short support legs and SC90 legs with cross bracing on the stage side. Masque sound provided cabling infrastructure and patch panels for speaker I/Os and 70V page program distribution (for the Rane Halogen paging system) throughout the theatre, along with lighting patch panels on the balcony rail.

### Other amenities

On the mezzanine (or dress circle) level is another spacious and attractive bar area. Jones says that the entranceway to the bar originally housed a series of mechanical rooms. The removal, to the roof, of the building’s chiller allowed this area to be opened up, creating





At top left, dangling from the ceiling, are the hoists used for the “Chromolume” effect in *Sunday in the Park with George*, the renovated theatre’s first tenant.

room for several amenities. Behind the bar area is the Ambassador Lounge; for a relatively small fee, patrons can upgrade their experience, dropping off their coats and bags and reserving a table for intermission drinks and snacks. The room was designed by Couyas in the theatre’s original green-and-bronze palette. Also, where possible, new bathroom facilities have been added, in order to shorten those long lines that are a feature of every Broadway intermission. (Couyas notes that, in any of ATG’s renovation products, he seeks to implement additional women’s rest rooms, which, as any theatergoer knows, are desperately needed.)

Jones notes that the project, moved fairly quickly and without setbacks. “It took a year to design and a year to build,” he says, by way of nothing that events moved fairly quickly and decisively. Couyas adds, “You rarely get to redesign or restore Broadway theatres. It was a massive honor to work on this for two years. The feedback from the

Broadway community has been very positive; they’ve welcomed us with open arms.”

One especially welcome aspect of the interior design is the use of posters and photos from past productions—a poster from Jean Anouilh’s *Becket*; a photo of Irene Worth, Jason Robards, and Maureen Stapleton in *Toys in the Attic*, a poster from *Jenny Kissed Me*, an early Jean Kerr comedy; and photos of Molly Picon and Godfrey Cambridge in little curio titled *How to Be a Jewish Mother*. Wall displays in the basement rest room area tell the story of the Harrises and their fateful trip on the Titanic; other displays downstairs recall the theatre’s time as a television studio.

As we go to press, *Sunday in the Park with George* is about to close, but the Hudson will not be dark for long. Only a few weeks later, *1984* begins previews. It seems that Broadway’s “newest” house is also aiming to be its busiest. 📶

Photo: Greg Maika