



The Robert W. Wilson MCC Theater Space is located on the ground floor of the Avalon Clinton residential tower. Opposite: The view from the stage of the Newman Mills.

Homecoming

After nearly three decades,
MCC Theater finds a permanent base

By: David Barbour

Since its founding in 1986, originally as Manhattan Class Company, MCC Theater has been one of Off Broadway's most reliable showcases for significant new writers. Among the highlights of history are Margaret Edson's *Wit*, Bryony Lavery's chilling drama *Frozen* (not the Disney musical), Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Pride* (which marked Ben Whishaw's New York debut), Penelope Skinner's *The Village Bike*, Neil LaBute's *Reasons to Be Pretty*, Sharr White's *The Other Place*, Simon Stephens' *Punk Rock*, and Jocelyn Bioh's *School Girls; or the Mean African Girls Play*, all of which earned multiple award nominations and wins, and some of which moved to Broadway. Other playwrights nurtured there include Tim Blake Nelson, Matthew Lopez, Robert

Askins, Noah Haidle, Halley Feiffer, and Lucy Thurber. As a contributor to the vitality of the New York theatre scene, its importance cannot be overstated.

For many years, however, the company, started by the actor Robert LuPone and the casting directors Will Cantler and Bernie Telsey, had a slightly ad hoc quality, with offices in one location and performances taking place in various Chelsea or Greenwich Village venues. In 2004, the company settled in at the Lucille Lortel Theatre, a storied Christopher Street playhouse and one of the spots where the Off Broadway movement was originally birthed. Over the course of 15 seasons, however, the theatre grew increasingly seedy; also, MCC needed a home base to support its wide-ranging ancillary programs, which include

developmental labs, reading series, and partnerships with city high schools.

In January, after several delays and plenty of creative design work, The Robert W. Wilson MCC Theater Space opened on 52nd Street, just west of Tenth Avenue, in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen district. The \$45-million project, designed by Andrew Berman Architect, consolidates all of the company's functions—production, development, administration—under one roof in a neighborhood that is fast-becoming one of the city's new theatre hubs. The new building contains two theatres, allowing MCC to double its production output: So far, these have included *Alice by Heart*, a new musical based on the Lewis Carroll classic; *BLKS*, a wisecracking comedy-drama about young black women in New York; *The Light*, a drama about sexual harassment and race; and *Moscow Moscow Moscow*, a smart-mouthed update of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

The Wilson MCC Theater Space is located in the ground floor of the Avalon Clinton, a residential tower. The MCC team first saw the building in 2007. What followed was a series of frustrating delays. According to the *New York Times*, "Real estate and regulatory issues delayed the MCC project, according to theater officials. The property firm that owned the building was sold along the way. And the design and approval process—the project is largely being financed, and therefore scrutinized, by city government—proved more time-consuming than MCC officials

had anticipated." According to a 2016 story in *The Villager*, "Plans to house the theatre in the base of the 27-story residential complex were first explored around five years ago, when the city's Department of Cultural Affairs announced it would partner with MCC to finance the \$35 million project. But the initial developer backed out of the venture and ownership of the building changed three times, which means the original 2013 opening date for the theater was pushed back repeatedly."

Little wonder that when the theatre had its official opening ceremony in January, it was marked by cheers, confetti, and plenty of celebratory speeches. The new 27,000-sq.-ft. space is poised to take MCC Theater to the next level of its development, providing a secure base for all its activities.

The building

Andrew Berman, tasked with designing a home base for MCC inside the raw space of an existing building, says, "One of the pleasures of this project was that MCC existed as a mature, burnished culture. Bernie, Bob, Will, and Blake [West, MCC's executive director] are a very tight team, with a lot of learning, experimentation, and success behind them. It was evident that MCC knew what MCC was and what they would continue to be. Never having had a facility of their own that accommodated the whole scope of their activities under one roof, it was new for them to consider the opportunities and decisions that an



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architectural project presented.”

Berman collaborated with theatre consultants Auerbach Pollock Friedlander (APF) and acoustician firm Akustiks. “Steve Friedlander helped conduct a space requirement survey,” Berman says. “We arrived at an ideal version, not tethered to the actual space. We learned that we needed another 50% of area to accommodate everything. The exercise was difficult up front, but also very instructive. It told us where we stood. The decision was not to cut back 50% in ambition but to figure out a way to maximize the



The Newman Mills has an exposed look, with plenty of hanging positions for gear. Gear for the audio-visual system was supplied by Masque Sound.

space, making it serve multiple purposes. Starting out knowing that we didn’t have enough space really got us focused on the hard conversations of how it was all going to lay out.

“The next level of discussion,” Berman continues, “was how big each theatre would be, how many they would hold, and which configuration would be right. We did an in-depth analysis of both spaces, deciding that one would be a traditional proscenium house with fixed seating and one would be a flexible black box.”

Next came the brain-teasing challenge of fitting two theatres, two rehearsal studios, administrative offices, wardrobe rooms, and dressing rooms into the available space. “Originally, there were two levels, and we created four,” Berman says. “The upper lobby level was made to create a fluid connection between the street/lobby level and the main stage theatre [known as the Newman Mills]. We also introduced a mezzanine level; maximizing this space allowed us to get dressing rooms and service spaces into the layout. It was a real puzzle to work out, a big part of which was figuring out how public and private



The Newman Mills seats 199 on the orchestra level and 45 in the mezzanine.

areas fit together. At times, they mix and at times they don’t; the architecture has to facilitate that.”

The overall building, employing concrete and Douglas Fir wood, feels expansive, especially considering how it enfolds so many functions into one space. One example of a public/private area is an intriguing little alcove. (See photo on opposite page). “It’s emblematic of a bigger design idea that permeates the entire space and it comes from getting to know MCC staff.” Berman says. “They are forever in conversation about everything; it’s never scheduled and always intense. The alcove is a place where such conversations could happen. During the day, it’s there for everyone who works there; at night, it’s available to the audience. We wanted all the public spaces to have that same quality; they are places where people can pull up a bench and have a conversation.”

As the accompanying photos show, both theatres are “naked” spaces, with no real décor and all theatrical functionality exposed. “I think I helped open the door to this approach,” Berman says. “MCC’s culture is all about process; everything is laid bare, and there is a lot of improvisation and trial and error. These spaces are about the act of making theatre.”

Newman Mills Theater

The main stage, the Newman Mills, is a 1,400-sq.-ft. proscenium house that seats 199 on the orchestra level and 45 in the mezzanine. (Seating was supplied by the Italian furniture designer Poltrona Frau.) “The goal was to improve on what the company had at the Lucille Lortel,” says Steve Friedlander. “They wanted more height to work with; the idea was to have 199 seats on the floor, to meet the seat count for their Equity contract; if they have a hit and want to negotiate an extension, they can amend the contract and add another 50 seats.”

He adds, “The mezzanine had to be inserted into an already-completed concrete box, so we had to find a way to work out any egress issues. Working out these details in

the confines of the existing space was a challenge. A number of structural elements in both spaces made for challenges, including big beams holding up the tower above the theatre. Finding room for catwalks and lighting positions wasn't easy." He notes that APF's experience with the Pershing Square Signature Theatre on 42nd Street, another multi-theatre venue fitting into an existing residential tower, was useful here.

Among the amenities in the Newman Mills is a rigging system with a moving grid. "It doesn't give them flying capacity," says Friedlander. "But you can bring it down to the deck level, hang gear, and send it back up. It speeds up on show installs and also helps them save money."

Niles Ray, also of APF, says, "We designed an intimate end-stage theatre that allowed for the elimination of the proscenium wall to provide more opportunity for performer interaction within the audience chamber. The motorized rigging system is a cost-effective solution that allows for lighting to be hung and circuited on the deck and flown to operating height. These five trusses, spanning the width of the stage, provide more flexibility than a conventional flying batten system. The combination of more cost-effective line-shaft mechanical rigging systems, from iWeiss, with state-of-the-art TAIT Navigator controls is an effective compromise."

In terms of lighting infrastructure, Ray adds, "Both the-

atres were originally designed when the transition from incandescent performance lighting to LEDs was beginning. At the time, we determined, in consultation with MCC, that conventional lighting was the best fit for the space. Once the project was ready to move into construction after the delays, we updated the systems to ETC Sensor3 ThruPower dimming. These flexible power controls can function as conventional dimmers to control incandescent loads or as relays for LED or other advanced fixtures. We also specified upgraded consoles that allow greater flexibility in the control of LEDs and other advanced fixtures." Lighting control is via a Gio@5 console. (Dimming, control, and distribution was supplied by Barbizon Lighting.)

Daniel Mei, who headed up the AV design for APF, says that the Newman Mills "has a basic center array loud-speaker system that can be used for speech reinforcement and simple playback. It can be augmented by additional loudspeakers, based on a production's requirements. Both theatres offer extensive copper and fiber optic audio and video cabling infrastructure that allows for speakers, projectors, cameras, and other AV gear to be used where needed."

Mei notes that the house sound rig consists of Meyer gear. "The Newman Mills has a UPJ-1P center cluster with four boxes and UP4-XPs built into the stage for front fill and 15 portable surround speakers, also from Meyer. They



This intriguing alcove space is Berman's response to MCC staff; it provides a place for private conversations or reflection.

have a small Soundcraft Si Performer Series console for mixing shows.”

Paul Scarbrough, of Akustiks, notes that the Newman Mills—at least from the viewpoint of acoustics—is more acoustically sophisticated than it first appears. “We worked with Andrew Berman on wall treatments to get a mix of diffuse and specular reflections. Above the balcony level are Tectum absorption panels; others are built into the catwalk area. We built a judicious amount of absorptive material into the seating design as well. Over the edge of the stage is a curving acoustic reflector that helps to project the sound of the performer’s voices out into the room. Also, he says, “The furthest seat in the balcony is not more than 35’ from the stage; in the orchestra, its 33’.” The mezzanine structure also helps to distribute audio around the room.

Scarbrough notes that the building rests over an Amtrak tunnel: “There are about 20 northbound and southbound train passbys a day.” In the Mills Newman, he says, “We poured a floating concrete slab under the floor, both in the stage and auditorium, to decouple the lowers level of the theatre from the structural slab below. It successfully defeats that sound from below.” He adds that ART/NY Theatres, which resides next to and above MCC, provides additional isolation. “There is also a concrete slab over the Newman Mills, with a suspended gypsum isolation ceiling

below it; ART NY, working with Arup, its acoustician, also installed a resilient wood floor to minimize footfall noise.”

The Frankel Theater

The black-box Susan and Ronald Frankel Theater comprises 1,800 sq. ft.; it accommodates 100, using retractable seating supplied by Jezet. Again, to facilitate changeovers, Friedlander says, “The theatre has overhead catwalks, the installation of which was coordinated with the structure above. These give the theatre staff the ability to work on hangs without needing to set up ladders; also, there is plenty of Unistrut, along with extra pipes, to give them lots of hanging positions.” The theatre is equipped with an ETC Ion console.

Mei adds, “We specified portable [Meyer] UPJ speakers for the Newman, with plenty of C-clamps and hanging brackets, along with a small console—another Soundcraft unit—and signal processing gear, the idea being that they could basically move gear wherever they need to. They have four speakers and will rent anything additional needed. The signal processing—both here and in the Newman Mills—is by BSS and the back of house is handled by Symetrix. One unique choice they made was to keep their Clear-Com system analog and patchable. This way, when they’re in rehearsal and working at tech tables, they can set up ten channels if they want—for audio, lighting, car-



Berman’s multi-level approach allowed him to make maximal use of the available space.



The interior, which makes use of concrete and Douglas Fir wood, feels remarkably spacious, despite the fact that it contains two theatres, various support spaces, and the theatre's administrative offices.

penters, etc. The plug-in points in the theatre all feed into an XLR patch panel. It's a holdover from their previous facility and they wanted to maintain it. For the back of house, the dressing rooms are shared between the two theatres; at the actual line controls, they can select which theatre they're listening to. Also, AV signals can also be patched together between theatres in the case of large, multi-venue events."

Because the Frankel sits directly over the Amtrak tunnel, Scarbrough says, "The developer did provide a complete isolated box-in-box assembly comprising concrete poured on special spring isolators; once the concrete is cured, you jack up the floor, screwing down the isolators to decouple it from the structural slab over the tunnel. The rest of the box-in-box construction consists of drywall partitions set on the floating concrete slab and braced off the walls with a resilient sway brace, equipped with a neoprene to avoid a direct connection to the non-isolated concrete wall beyond. The ceiling, which is also made of drywall, hanging on spring isolators, decoupling it from the structural slab above."

He adds, "The main challenge in the Frankel was to develop wall treatments to absorb sound, because the

room can be set up in any number of ways. The source can be from anywhere, so you want the space to be responsive, regardless of where the performer is in the house. We worked with Andrew to develop wall treatments that could provide a measure of absorption and diffusion and reflection. Because it is a relatively tall space, which could become too live, there's a fair amount of sound absorption on the upper walls and rear walls of the space."

Also, Scarbrough says, "We were careful about room acoustic design and room ventilation systems. Air supply is from underneath the floor in the Newman Mills and in the Frankel it's from the sides." Overall, he says, "The artistic directors of MCC had a pretty definitive vision of how the spaces should sound, the crisp articulation of sound, and the ability of performers to nuance their performance."

The rest of the building

The lobby and reception area for both theatres comprise 3,400 sq. ft., with a box office, bar, and other amenities. (APF supplied infrastructure for a video display in the lobby.) Also on the first floor is Studio 1, which spans



The Susan and Ronald Frankel Theater is a black box, seating 100, that can be reconfigured from show to show.

1,000 sq. ft. Studio 2, located on the second floor, is 577 sq. ft. The backstage area, shared by both theatres, covers 1,060 sq. ft. A wardrobe room is 330 sq. ft. in size and the dressing rooms take up 430 sq. ft. Berman says, “It’s worth mentioning that one real intention was to create quality public spaces for the community, those making theatre, the students who come there, and their very loyal subscribers. With that in mind, they wanted their spaces to be warm and welcoming and not just when they turn the lights on at 7pm.”

In other amenities, the Brooklyn-based artist Francesco Simeti created two new visual art installations for the building: For the 53rd Street façade stage door entrance, he provided “Tale of a City,” a collage of historic images of New York City that speaks to the cultural and ecological history of the neighborhood. Inside, he installed a tapestry, “Set Perspectives,” composed of historic imagery relating to theatre sets, masks, and props from cultures all around the world.

Others involved in the project included Altieri Sebor Wieber (MEP design), Gilsanz Murray Steficek (structural

design), and Cline Bettridge Bernstein Lighting Design. The project cost \$45 million dollars, of which \$38 had been raised by the building’s opening. The campaign has been supported by the City of New York, which has contributed over \$28 million, and by a \$2.5 million challenge grant from The Robert W. Wilson Charitable Trust.

The neighborhood around the Robert W. Wilson MCC Theater Space is rapidly becoming one of the liveliest in Manhattan in terms of theatre. In addition to long-term residents like Ensemble Studio Theatre (which is planning a renovation) and INTAR, which presents the works of Hispanic playwrights, ART/NY Theatres recently opened its doors, joining Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater a few blocks away and Irish Arts Center, which is currently building a new facility. Clearly, the move into the new space has been an enormous boost for the company. Attending a press event, I was part of a group taken on a tour a member of MCC staff. At the end, I turned to him and said, “It’s quite a difference.” Beaming from ear to ear, he replied, “It’s *quite* a difference.” 📶