



# Return to 42nd Street

Signature Theatre's search for a new home ends where it began, with a stunning new venue

By: David Barbour

The opening of The Pershing Square Signature Center on 42nd Street last January was a major event for many reasons. It represented a big step forward for one of New York's best-regarded theatre companies, giving it a much bigger canvas on which to do its work. It added three new playhouses to the burgeoning Off-Broadway community that has grown up around the Broadway district, and it was one of the last pieces of the transformation of West 42nd Street from an unattractive urban outpost to a popular residential and entertainment

hub. And the theatre's plentiful public space—an enormous, light-filled lobby complete with bar and bookstore—has given the area a graceful new social amenity.

It is also the culmination of a ten-year saga, which sent the company on a search all over Manhattan for a new home base, a search that ended almost where it began.

Founded in 1991, Signature Theatre made its mark by presenting entire seasons devoted to a single playwright. (The company played a significant role in rescuing both Edward Albee and Horton Foote from

their career doldrums; other writers benefitted as well.) In its earliest years, Signature was itinerant, moving from one rented space to another. By 1997, it was ensconced in a home of its own, the Peter Norton Space, on 42nd Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues. An attractive venue with good sightlines and a decent-sized lobby, its only major drawback was its far-west location, off the beaten path for many theatregoers.

In 2004, it was announced that Signature would occupy part of the cultural center adjacent to the Freedom Tower, then the name for the

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skyscraper to be built on the site of the former World Trade Center. (The cultural center was, at the time, a key aspect of the proposed building, along with a 9/11 memorial.) The proposal involved two theatres, seating 199 and 499 respectively; two studios for rehearsals and performances; and a bookstore, café, and lobby. Signature would exist side by side with the dance presenter Joyce Theatre, a drawing center, and other cultural organizations; these spaces would also be made available to other institutions, such as the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Tribeca Film Festival.

The plan was the subject of much discussion. *The New York Times* editorialized that the presence of a cultural facility on this site would “amplify and illuminate the meaning of 9/11,” while *The New York Observer* responded, “There is no logical connection between a performance space and a memorial, no matter how reputable and highly respected the arts entities involved.” In any case, the city of New York withdrew its support in 2007, because the \$700 million cost was too high. Plan B involved moving Signature to Miles and Shirley Fiterman Hall, part of Borough of Manhattan Community College, another downtown institution that was heavily damaged on 9/11. Again, the project was rejected, thanks to the \$360-million price tag.

Other possibilities were considered and discarded. In 2008, project leaders announced that the new home base for Signature would be in MiMA, a new 68-story residential tower designed by the firm Arquitectonica and built by The Related Companies at 42nd Street and Tenth Avenue, just across the street and one block east of the Peter Norton Space. The new theatre, with Gehry Partners still on board as the architectural firm, occupies 70,000 sq. ft. of contiguous space, providing room for three theatres plus rehearsal spaces, administrative offices, and the previously mentioned café,

bookstore, and lobby. H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture was the architect of record on the project.

The new plan proved to be felicitous for many reasons. At the World Trade Center, the Signature would have had to contend with a vertical layout, with theatres and other spaces stacked on top of one another; the one-floor plan at MiMA makes getting around much easier for both staff and patrons. It’s also debatable whether audiences would be attracted to Lower Manhattan, which remains relatively unpopulated in the evening. Also, the character of 42nd Street has changed markedly since 1997; MiMA is only one of several new residential towers, bringing tens of thousands of residents to the area. New hotels have opened up, along with many restaurants. The new space also accommodates the Signature’s increasingly ambitious mission, which involves three separate programs. Residency One presents a season-long series of works by a single writer. Residency Five is a five-year program, offering three full productions of new plays to each member of a selected group of writers. The Legacy Program offers the company’s veteran playwrights the opportunity to produce a new work or revival. In its last couple of seasons at the Norton, Signature presented a pair of epic productions—the nine-hour *Orphans’ Home Cycle*, by Horton Foote, and a revival of *Angels in America*, by Tony Kushner—that taxed the theatre’s resources to their limits. Clearly, it needed more room to create more ambitious productions.

Since its opening, The Pershing Square Signature Center—a \$25-million donation gave naming rights to Pershing Square Capital Management—has been a hive of activity, with all three theatres open nearly all the time; as we went to press, productions there included an acclaimed revival of August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, a revised version of David Henry Hwang’s *Golden Child*,

and a rental, a commercial production of *Emotional Creature*, a theatre piece by Eve Ensler. The project had a budget of \$66 million, and it would appear that the money has been very well spent. Comparisons with London’s Royal National Theatre are not out of order.

The overall design

Because Frank Gehry didn’t design the entire building, he was denied the opportunity to create the kind of structure, dominated by flamboyantly curved stainless-steel exteriors, for which he is famous. There is a sinuous quality to the theatre’s interior, however, that surely reflects the architect’s touch. This is evident even in the theatre’s marquee, a glass canopy that ends in a scroll suggestive of a sheet of writing paper. Entering the street-level lobby, one sees the box office where advance ticket sales take place. Next to this is the curved, plywood-clad Diller–Von Furstenberg staircase, which leads to the 6,400-sq.-ft. lobby, the theatre’s central hub and a meeting place for actors, staff members, and patrons.

Open during the day, the lobby has become a place for people in the neighborhood to take a meeting while having a bite or a drink. Musical performances are now being held there before and after shows. The café serves sandwiches and small plates, as well as coffee, tea, soft drinks, and a full bar. The bookstore features works by playwrights associated with the company, as well as biographies and critical studies.

A trio of interactive touch screens in the lobby allows visitors to access information about Signature’s production history and the careers of the resident playwrights. Twelve additional plasma screens accept feeds from social media and responses from the touch screens. The plasma screens also provide contextual materials on the plays in performance and promotions for upcoming shows.



The Irene Diamond Stage is modeled on the Peter Norton Space, but is much bigger, with 299 seats instead of Norton’s 160.

Irene Diamond Stage

Consultants Auerbach Pollock Friedlander (APF) have collaborated with James Houghton, Signature’s artistic director, on the development of a new space since 2004. The APF team included Steven Friedlander, principal in charge; Don Guyton, project manager; Daniel Mei, senior audio-video systems designer; and Lisa Cameron and Niles Ray, technical designers. Over the next few years, APF consulted on modifications to the initial programming studies, reviewed the site options, and provided initial concept plans for the MiMA location. South Norwalk, Connecticut-based Akustiks served as the acoustical consultant on the project.

The largest of the theatres is the Irene Diamond Stage, which is modeled on the Peter Norton Space but is much bigger. (Seating has been increased from 160 to 299 seats; the

Diamond’s total area is 4,900 sq. ft.). Like the Norton, it has an end-stage configuration and raked seating. The walls feature a series of shaped plywood panels that wrap around the walls in an arrangement designed to evoke the texture of cracked earth; the panels, which are there for acoustic purposes, are painted to be increasingly dark, fading to black as they approach the stage. The panels at the back of the theatre are perforated, and the acoustic material behind them helps dampen the reflections in the room. The theatre opens directly onto the lobby through a single large doorway. The rear of the auditorium features traditional light and sound lock vestibules.

Russell Todd, a managing partner of Akustiks, notes that each of the theatre’s ceilings has been treated acoustically, to isolate it from activity in the building overhead. Seating,

provided by Ducharme, comes in two colors, black and tan, adding to the room’s eye-pleasing effect.

The stage is 59’ wide by 38’ long, making it one of the largest Off-Broadway theatres in New York; it is created using 30 Wenger demountable infill platforms. A fixed pipe grid is placed over the first 20’ of the downstage area, and a full fly tower rests on the remaining 18’ upstage. The proscenium adjusts from 45’ wide and 20’ high to 37’ wide and 17’ high; it can also be removed altogether. (This is system is by iWeiss Theatrical solutions.)

Other features include 426 dimmed/switched lighting circuits, 362 of which can be split and operated separately via dimmer doubling, for a total of 766 circuits (ETC Sensor dimmers are used in all three theatres); a 4,000-channel ETC Eos lighting control console; 3,300-sq.-ft.





The wood panels in the Griffin frame the proscenium and wrap around the balcony front, creating a ceiling under the lighting bridges.

pipe grid (also by iWeiss); a Meyer Sound loudspeaker system consisting of a house left cluster of one UPQ-2P and two UPA-1Ps, a house right cluster of one UPQ-2P and two UPA-1Ps, ten UPM-1P surrounds, and one HP-700 subwoofer; and an Allen & Heath iLive-T112 digital mixing system with iDR-48 MixRack. (QLab software is used in all three theatres to play back sound effects.) Las Vegas-based Stage Technologies worked with iWeiss, its local distributor, to supply 14 Big Tow BT300Lite underhung packaged hoists and an Illusionist console. (Designed for theatres, schools, and multipurpose venues, the Illusionist features three playbacks, a 17" LCD screen, and an internal DVD-RW and optional rack-mounting rails). Stage Technologies and iWeiss also partnered to provide the power distros, raceways, control points, and E-stops.

Designers have taken advantage

of the Diamond's size and technical capabilities. The opening production, Edward Albee's *The Lady from Dubuque*, featured a spectacular John Arnone set depicting a vast, sleekly modern residential interior complete with curving staircase. Walt Spangler's design for Kenneth Lonergan's *Medieval Play*—a series of pop-up views of countrysides and castle interiors—made extensive use of automation. Michael Carnahan's design for *The Piano Lesson* presents a two-level interior, and the design also suggests the adjoining buildings and a view of the street outside. All of these were designed on a scale commensurate with Broadway production values. Paul Ziemer, director of production at Signature, notes that many designers associated with the company were consulted on the theatre; their input provided valuable insights as the creative team designed the theatres.

**Alice Griffin Jewel Box**

For intimacy, the second space, the Alice Griffin Jewel Box Theatre, can't be beat; it is a grand opera house, with a proscenium stage and balcony with side box seating, reduced to the scale of 199 seats. No seat is more than 40' from the stage, and the sightlines are especially good. Gehry's interior design features a fantastical array of angled crafted wood panels that frame the proscenium and wrap around the balcony front, creating a ceiling under the lighting bridges above the audience. The panels are stained a deep, chocolate brown that fades to black as the house lights go down; they are also acoustically engineered, a result of the collaboration between Gehry and Akustiks. The Griffin is the only theatre of the three to feature a true sound-isolation ceiling, Todd notes.

Todd, who says he and Houghton evaluated the acoustics at a number of theatres, also notes that the



No seat is more than 40' from the stage in the Griffin, an opera house design scaled to intimate proportions.





The Linney Theatre offers playwrights and directors the freedom to explore the relationship between audiences and performers.

addition of the balcony is helpful, as it brings a significant portion of the audience closer to the stage. Seating is by Ducharme.

The stage is 45' wide by 25' deep, created by twenty-six 4' by 8' demountable platforms from Wenger. iWeiss and Stage Technologies supplied 18 BT300 Lite hoists, which are wall-mounted, and an Illusionist console, along with the associated power distros, raceways, control panels, and E-stops. The room features 350 dimmed/switched lighting circuits; a 2,048-channel ETC Ion lighting control console; a Meyer Sound system utilizing two UPA-2Ps for the balcony, two UPA-1Ps for the orchestra, 20 UPM-1Ps for surrounds, and one HP-600 subwoofer; and an Allen & Heath iLive T80 digital mixing system with iDR-32 MixRack.

Intimacy is the thing in the Griffin. Its first two productions in the space—Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot* and Will Eno's *Title and Deed*—contained many moments when actors spoke barely above a hush, yet every word was intelligible.

#### Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre

As the complex's flexible space, the Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre can be arranged in a number of configurations, including a 42'-wide-by-30'-deep end stage with 199 seats; a 30'-wide-by-18'-deep alley stage with 244 seats; and a 30'-wide-by-24'-deep thrust stage with 236 seats, supplied by Wenger. (The stages are created using one hundred 3'-by-6' demountable platforms from Wenger.) An upper level gallery, with one row of

audience seating, surrounds the room; when the end stage configuration is used, the stepped seating meets the gallery at the back of the seating area, allowing patrons to enter the room either through the upper gallery or the floor level. Acoustical treatments can be seen on both levels. A 1,900-sq.-ft pipe grid was installed by iWeiss.

Other technical features include 340 dimmed/switched lighting circuits; a 1,900-sq.-ft. overhead pipe grid for both lighting and scenery; a 2,048-channel ETC Ion lighting control console; six Meyer Sound UPJ-1P loudspeakers; and a 32-channel Allen & Heath iLive T80 digital mixing system with iDR-32 MixRack. The loudspeakers are set up as portable gear, to accommodate changes in the room's configuration.

The first three productions in the



One of the theatre's two studio spaces, used for rehearsals, classes, and readings.

Linney—Katori Hall's *Hurt Village*, Athol Fugard's *The Train Driver*, and *Emotional Creature*—have made use of different stage setups.

#### Additional rooms, communications, and connections

In addition, the 1,632-sq.-ft. Rehearsal Studio functions as a rehearsal hall and movement studio. One of its walls has mirrors that can be covered, when necessary, with tracking velour drapes made of 21oz. velour masking from iWeiss. The equal-sized Studio Theatre can be used as a performance venue (with same velour masking.) It is equipped with a complete stage lighting system, including twenty-eight 2.4kW dimmers and a 100A three-phase company switch. Both rooms employ QSC HPR122i loudspeakers with HPR M10 mounting kits. iWeiss also supplied the 1,450-sq.-ft. pipe grid.

The theatre makes use of a Riedel production communication setup, including a digital matrix intercom system and wireless intercom channels. Digital control stations allow for party-line communications as well as point-to-point station communication. Riedel digital communication panels, located within each stage manager station, allow for stage and house announcements and back-of-house paging to dressing rooms, shops, offices, and lounges. Backstage program monitoring and paging feeds from each performance space are selectable within each dressing room, shop, and office. This lets production staff and performers monitor audio within each theatre and provides flexibility when assigning dressing rooms. The house manager panels in each theatre's lobby allow for audience chimes and communications with stage managers.

Each theatre is equipped with a

fixed-view camera, which feeds video to latecomers via displays in the lobbies. Video cameras are also routed to a QAM modulated digital video system for monitoring backstage areas. Stage manager stations are also provided with local video displays to allow for monitoring of the fixed-view camera feed as well as infrared cameras. A 12-channel low-voltage cue light system is deployed within each theatre. A fiber-optic and Cat6 backbone provides interconnectivity; more than 100 device panels and wall plates are fed from an extensive analog and digital wiring infrastructure using both copper and fiber-optic cabling.

In its first year, The Pershing Square Signature Center has proved to be a smashing success, so much so that those involved must surely feel that their search for a new venue was well worthwhile. As it happened, there was no place like home. 📶