

The Topography Game



Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's new venue is situated for success

By: Bryan Reesman



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Change can be challenging, and it can also be transcendent. Such was the case with the Cincinnati Playhouse In The Park, a beloved arts institution in the Queen City whose main theatre had become outmoded, crying out for rejuvenation.

The Playhouse has a storied history extending back to October 1960, when the 225-seat Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre first opened. Through the decades, it has attracted top-tier talent like Scott Bakula, Swoosie Kurtz, Lynn Redgrave, Kathleen Turner, and Henry Winkler. In July 1968, the 626-seat Robert S. Marx Theatre opened, winning awards for its innovative structure. (The company is also the recipient of two Tony Awards, in 2004 as that year’s outstanding regional theatre and in 2007 for its revival of the musical *Company*, which transferred to Broadway.)

In 2016, the Playhouse’s creative staff realized that a strong wind of change was blowing. The Marx was a large hall that some actors found hard to fill with their voices; it had other acoustic issues, among them harsh sound reflections from its concrete walls. Furthermore, its asymmetrical thrust stage, which had been popular in the 1970s, needed to be converted to the universal proscenium-arch style.

“The old space had a number of idiosyncrasies that we got used to over time, and they were challenging,” admits Blake Robison, the Playhouse’s Osborn Family producing artistic director. “There was no fly space, extremely limited wing space, and the only way you could get stuff on and offstage was through the floor. The voms were in these funky places that made no geometric sense whatsoever. The lighting grid was not parallel or 90° to the stage. It was at a weird angle, which drove lighting designers crazy.”

The desire for a new facility led to a fundraising initiative for the \$50-million Moe and Jack’s Place—The Rouse Theatre; it also created a major quandary for the Cincinnati Playhouse. If the company were to replace the Marx, would it be able to sustain being closed for multiple seasons while the old structure was torn down and a new one built in its place? The situation, tricky as it was, resulted in an intriguing solution.

The Shelterhouse is located on the edge of Mount Adams, overlooking Eden Park, with the Marx adjacent to it. The Playhouse and its architectural and design teams decided to build the Rouse Theatre down the hill from the Shelterhouse. The latter venue received a cosmetic facelift and mechanical adjustments, including new seats and sound panels; several layers of old stage, built up over the years, were stripped out, dropping the stage height by more than 1’. But the heavy workload revolved around building the Rouse.

Discussions regarding the new theatre began roughly seven years ago. Construction, which took two years, was completed in March 2023. The first nine months were

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comprised of pre-construction work—digging, laying foundations and electric lines, and so forth. As Robison notes, “We only had to be homeless for half a season. In other theatres, you might be out for a year or more. But this allowed us to start building while we were still producing in the old theatre.”

Joshua Dachs, principal at theatre planning and design consultants Fisher Dachs Associates, notes the importance of playing “the topography game,” which involved retaining the hillside and bringing a roadway to the lobby of the Rouse at the bottom of the hill. The Rouse was built directly below the Shelterhouse—it starts at a lower point on the hill and descends from there—thus allowing the buildings to be connected.

“We looked at 14 different strategies before we figured out how to accomplish this,” Dachs recalls. “Each of them had different schedule or cost impacts, or disruption to the existing building impacts, or tree impacts because we’re at a park.”

Speaking with Robison on the BHDP *Trends & Tensions* podcast, Tom Arends, design leader of BHDP, the theatre’s architect, explains, “We did a lot of work with Playhouse and with the park board to really make sure this building was anchored to the park...to the use of materiality, how we sited it, the pathways that connected to different places throughout the area.” Enumerating the project’s challenges, he cites “the exterior of the building itself. Blake and I had a lot of conversations with the park board, and there were times when the materiality of the exterior of the building was challenged from a value-engineering standpoint. But Blake, thankfully, held true to where we started, so we have...authentic wood.” This, he adds, provides a strong connection to the surrounding park.

Given the logistics of the building’s layout and the location of roadways, Dachs notes, “The new theatre had to be put on a very steep piece of land; you enter practically at balcony level and descend from there. The theatre cascades down the hill and, by the time you get to the stage, there’s probably 20’ of air before you get to the hillside. The slope does that; the box of the theatre sticks out from it and is supported from below. It’s a very complicated section. We also had to figure out how to get trucks down to where the new stage elevation was while also finding a way for trucks to continue to serve the Shelterhouse and for catering to be delivered to the lobbies. It became a very three-dimensional puzzle.”

Much of the existing structure, including the administrative wing and lobby were “reused and stitched back together quite successfully,” Dachs says. He also notes that the layout makes it easy for patrons to find everything in the new building, from concessions to restrooms to theatre entrances; he adds that the new donor lounge offers great views of Eden Park.

According to Robison, the buildings were leveled so that the lobby and orchestra section of the Rouse are now on the same level as the entrance and parking. A key goal was to improve accessibility to the space.

“Now you can park, walk in, walk into the back of the theatre, take your seat, [and] there are no stairs up or down at all,” Robison says. “The balcony [of the Rouse] and Shelterhouse are on level two. On the stage level, there are dressing rooms, prop areas, and a small shop. Another level below has the costume shop, the two rehearsal spaces, and various lighting and sound offices.”

Beyond the lobby is a “beautiful plaza out front, with



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picnic tables, for when the weather's nice," Robison says. "There's an outdoor play area and children's stage, which we use a lot for our summer camps. While I was walking out yesterday, patrons had gone to the bar and the concession and brought all their food out on the picnic table. That was just lovely to see."

As Dachs remarks, the Rouse has a proper stage house with stage left, stage right, wings, and a fly tower. The sloped seating layout is divided into three sections, and the parterre and balcony rows are no more than three seats deep.

"There was a conscious decision to reduce capacity and to create a space that was more intimate," says Cathleen Bachman, principal at Fisher Dachs. "The original theatre had a cross aisle that split the seating bowl into two zones, and it was decided to step away from that kind of organization and to have the audience feel like everyone is seated in a comparable zone relative to the stage. I think that's been very successful."

Construction largely took place under restricted pandemic conditions, so 3D modeling and virtual walk-throughs, including views from different seating positions,

helped everyone on the theatre and design sides keep track of how the project was evolving.

BHDP was the design lead, and Moody Nolan handled the contract documents. "The design lead hadn't ever done this building type before, so it meant that we all really needed to work together closely," Dachs says. "All those questions about the geometry and profile section of the theatre and the materials were discussed enormously among the team. The VR tools were really helpful with that, right down to the detailing of the walls. It was a really good team effort."

"This was one of the first projects where we really used VR," adds Bachman. "We'd had maybe one or two projects earlier with it, but this was probably the first really intense use of it, and it was really helpful."

Another important aspect of the process was having complete access to the theatre's staff. Dachs says FDA always prefers it when those who work there get to participate, allowing the firm to tailor everything to their clients' preferences.

The Rouse has a single balcony and a main level with a

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parterre that feels like a balcony. The intimacy of the space connects the audience more readily with the performers. The dimensions of the stage house are 40' deep by 82' wide by 70' high. There is no orchestra pit but a flexible apron makes it possible to extend the stage. The trap room below is 24' by 40' and 19', floor to floor. Capacity was reduced from the Marx's 626 to 537. With regional theatres facing hard financial times, Robison says it is better to have a more intimate space that is regularly sold out. The smaller space also tied in with the sonic edict for the new facility.

Acoustics

"Josh Dachs and I worked on the design of a real scenic theatre that you could fill without having to mic everybody," explains Mark Holden, chairman and lead acoustic designer for acoustic and audio/video consulting firm Jaffe Holden. The key sonic directive was to use the natural sound of the room to support actors' projected voices. Specifically designed to support speech intelligibility, the room is narrow enough to get lateral sound reflections off

the side walls.

"It pulls everybody in tight," Holden says. "The balconies have a limited number of rows. We push everybody as close as possible to the proscenium and reduce the distances so that the sound projection doesn't have very far to go. Then we control the reflections off the sidewalls and the ceiling, so that we have intense initial reflections from the reflectors overhead, from the side reflectors built into the balcony fronts, and the walls behind those first few rows. With the intense level of early reflections, we eliminate all late reflections with sound absorption and acoustic treatment. You get the direct sound, followed by a number of early reflections that come in right afterward from those surfaces, and then it's gone."

The discreetly applied acoustic panels on the walls are approximately 3' by 4'; they were installed, according to Holden, "as appliqué; that way, they could be more carefully integrated into the design. They're composed of applied wood diffusers with sound absorption material. [The different patterns] provide diffusion and spread the sound around. There's a combination of absorbing diffusing panels

Photo: Courtesy of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park



The theatre under construction. Much of the existing structure, including the administrative wing and lobby, was "reused and stitched back together quite successfully," Dachs says.



The view from the stage. "It pulls everybody in tight," Holden says. "The balconies have a limited number of rows. We push everybody as close as possible to the proscenium and reduce the distances so that the sound projection doesn't have to go very far."



Above and below: Installing the rigging system. There are 53 undedicated, 1,900lb capacity, single purchase manual counterweight sets, 8" on center. Also, there are 54'-long battens for the 38'-wide proscenium opening.

Top left photo: Mikki Schaffner
Top right and bottom photos:
Courtesy of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park

all in the same system." The 4' by 7' sound panels lining the underside of the catwalk are more shaped plywood.

In terms of external sound intrusions, Holden notes the advantage of being on a quiet site atop a hill. The nearby freeway produces only modest noise, and, he says, the

theatre staff was not concerned with the occasional thunderstorm.

The audio package for the Rouse reflects its intended use for original productions, not touring shows. According to Andrew Smith, owner and principal consultant of Boyce



Nemec Designs, the main PA is a Meyer Sound LINA line array system at left and right with Meyer's ULTRA-X40 Series in the center. Also featured is a surround system of JBL AC25s plus a QSC Q-Sys Core 510i digital processor, QIO network expanders, and CX-Q 8K8 and CX-Q 4K8 digital amplifiers. The mixer is a Yamaha CL5. The theatre also has a complete digital signage package. Both rehearsal rooms feature high-quality sound systems.

"We did do effects speakers, but we didn't put in immersive audio or Spacemap Go or any of those systems," Smith says. "Sometimes there are surround effects. The sound system was designed to be somewhat flexible because each production has its own sound designer, so it does have the ability to be adjusted from production to production. It's a pretty straightforward live performance AV package."

"The Rouse is similar to 38 or 39 Broadway houses. We're already in discussions with a number of producers, and we anticipate our first pre-Broadway production will be in the fall of '24." — Robison

For hearing assistance, he adds, "We did put in inductive loops in, so it's very good for universal access. [The Rouse] has both infrared and inductive loop systems. A lot of theatres aren't putting in inductive loops, so that's going a little above and beyond for accessibility."

The Rouse is also equipped for non-theatrical rentals, including a 26'-wide, 16'-high projection screen. The theatre has the ability to display PowerPoint presentations and can be rented for different uses during the daytime.

Lighting and rigging

In terms of lighting, the Rouse has a superior setup to the Marx, from its grid to various followspots mounted in various positions. Jeff McCrum, associate at Fisher Dachs, says there are six racks (570 in total) of [ETC Sensor] ThruPower dimmers. Because ThruPower products combine several uses in one module, McCrum calls them "future-proof," adding that each provides "the ability to be a halogen dimmer one day and, the next day, a relay for LEDs or moving lights.

"There are also 48 relays of 208V power," McCrum adds. "Some older fixtures still run on to 208. If they want to get some less expensive moving lights or something of that nature, they absolutely can. We can also break 208 out into 220F circuits. We added a full Ethernet lighting backbone that runs data for all the DMX fixtures. Ethernet lets us control a vast variety of DMX universes, and we can break up each electric into its own universe, which gives end users a

lot of flexibility when it comes to tracking down issues very close to showtime." Also featured is an ETC CueStation cue light system.

McCrum adds that the theatrical rig is linked to the ETC Paradigm system, which handles architectural lighting. "They have button stations that control the house lights or the theatrical lights," McCrum says. Then again, the theatrical lighting console can lock out the button stations, controlling everything in the house. "It's all one system. We can control everything together." Otherwise, the theatre makes use of its existing gear package for onstage lighting and control.

Atypically, the Playhouse directly bought its rigging and trap system. "Usually, the rigging contractor and the trap contractor are subs to the general contractor, and there are good reasons for that," says Joseph Mobilia, principal at Fisher Dachs. In this case, the now-retired Cincinnati Playhouse production manager Phil Rundle handled the direct owner purchase.

"We worked very closely with Phil in terms of the specifications for the rigging and the trap system, and then the shop drawing review and the dealings with those contractors, which was very unusual," Mobilia says. "It avoids or minimizes general contractor markup, and our word of caution for something like that is you really have to get along with your GC. They have to be very cooperative because your stuff is ultimately integral to the schedule and the construction. From all appearances, that relationship was very good, and it worked out fine."

The gridiron is 61'. There is a fire curtain with motorized rigging, and the house curtain has manual counterweight rigging. The system features 53 undedicated, 1,900lb capacity, single-purchase manual counterweight sets, 8" on center. There are 54'-long battens for the 38'-wide proscenium opening.

Rigging contractor Texas Scenic dealt directly with Sightline Commercial Solutions, who handled the stage trap system. Mobilia says it was "a real race to the finish for the first show [*A Chorus Line*], and Texas Scenic really had all hands on deck to get everything in and up and running in time for their opening. It was very much a case of all's well that ends well in terms of the owner relationship to those subs [for] completion."

McCrum feels that the balcony offers a nice, flowing way into the space. "The catwalks are in great locations," he says. "There's a followspot booth now, [which provides] an awful lot of flexibility for them. They have positions at the end of the balcony and the level above where scenery can go directly onto the stage. You can have an actor appear at the balcony level, next to the proscenium, and swing out a rope onto the stage or take stairs or a ladder down [to it]. The idea of having actors bleed into what has traditionally been audience-only spaces is really neat."

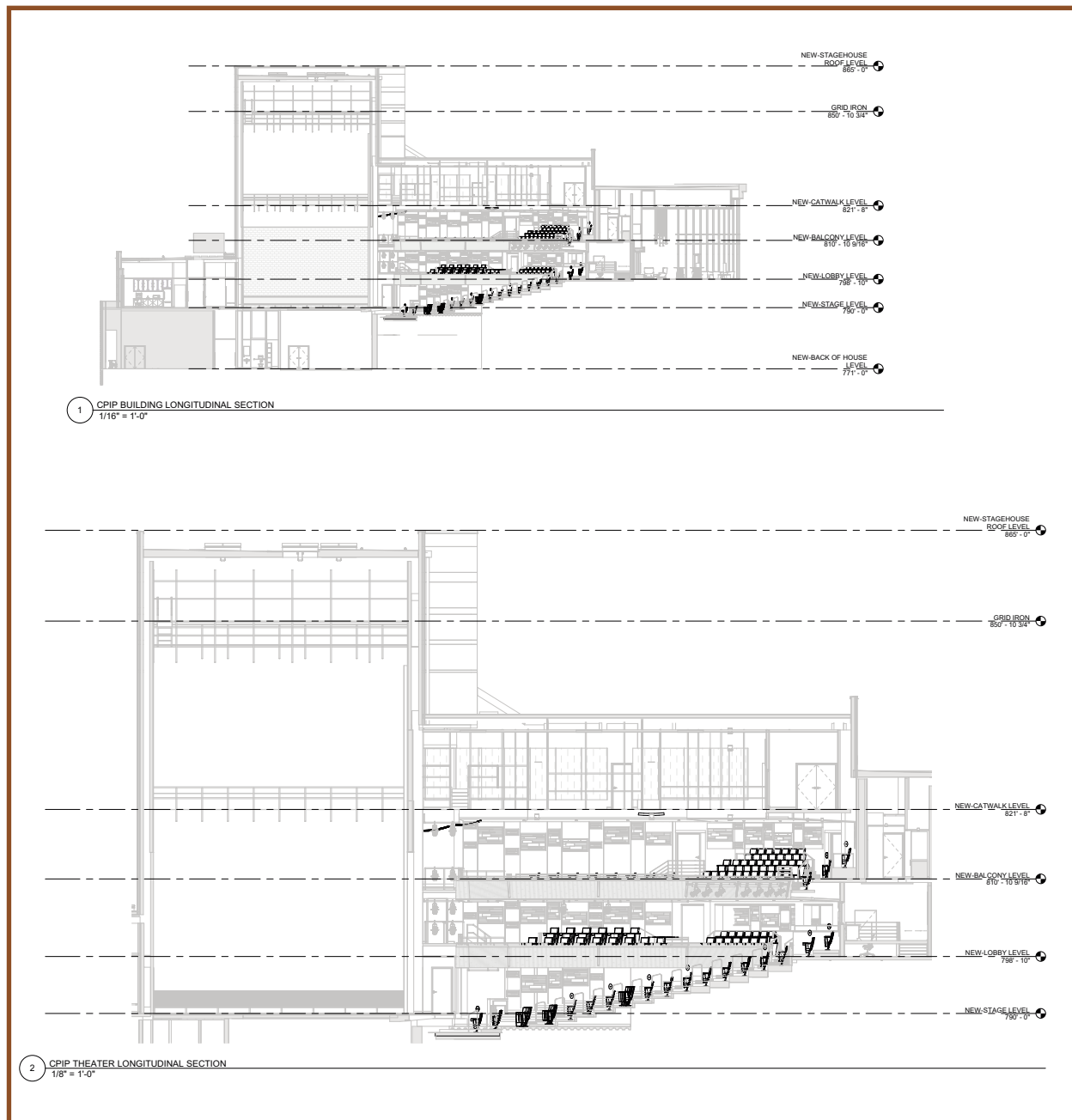
Despite the lack of an orchestra pit, musicians can be

placed upstage, as 16 were for *A Chorus Line* earlier this year. (They were hidden behind a drop for most of the show). Robison says musicians can also be placed in the trap room or a rehearsal hall. With greater possibilities for contemporary productions, the Rouse also lends itself to the idea of being a venue for pre-Broadway tryouts.

“Part of our plan moving forward, both creatively and business [-wise], is to do the occasional pre-Broadway enhanced production,” Robison says. “We’ve never been able to do that because the Marx Theatre didn’t match up with any theatre on the face of the planet. But the Rouse is very, very similar to 38 or 39 of the Broadway houses.

We’re already in discussions with a number of producers, and we anticipate our first pre-Broadway production will be in the fall of ‘24.”

The first four productions in the Rouse have included *A Chorus Line* and *Ring Of Fire: The Music Of Johnny Cash*. Robison says attendance has been stellar. The new theatre is fulfilling the promise of its original conception. “We’re thrilled that we have all of these new tools to bring our stories to life,” declares Robison. “We’ve gotten a lot of different looks already, and we’re discovering all the tricks of the new space. It’s quite wonderful.” 📶



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