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A new building offers Chicago theatergoers an immersive experience—and more

By: Rand Minster

Not so long ago, Writers Theatre—one of the top six regional theatres in the country, according to The Wall Street Journal—produced and performed plays in the back of a bookstore in Evanston, Illinois.

This tiny venue, with ticket holders jammed into 50 seats, treated audiences to an immersive, intimate performance experience that became the company’s hallmark. From its first performance in this little space in 1992, Writers Theatre built its reputation on presenting innovative interpretations of classic work and approaching contemporary pieces with boldness and vigor.

The technical aspects of the fifty-space, however, limited the company’s capabilities, notes production manager Adam Friedland. “When I started more than 12 years ago, there wasn’t even a lighting grid,” he says. “I put in a Unistrut grid so we didn’t mess up the structural integrity of the roof. We were running sound off a computer, and we had a total of 36 dimmers. The space had no single-phase power. At the same time, people loved that space—every time, they came into a different environment. It was on par with Chicago Shakespeare and Steppenwolf.” Two of Chicago’s most revered theatres, “with the same designers and actors.”

By 2003, when the theatre’s high-quality productions had gained it a loyal following, Writers Theatre expanded its capacity by adding a second venue, a 180-seat thrust stage in a building that also housed the Women’s Library Club. Having two theatres allowed for more performances of twice as many plays, but Writers Theatre quickly reached capacity once again.

“We had a grid and a booth, so that was an improvement from the original space,” says Friedland. “But the dressing room area was also the green room, and the stage manager and wardrobe person’s workspace. The only thing separating them was a couple of curtains. There was no shop space—I was building out in the parking lot. During the winter, paint doesn’t like to stick.”

Equally important, the space in the Library Club had begun to fall apart to a degree that affected the audience as well as the actors and technicians.

It was time for the next move—and this one would be major. Writers Theatre sought a somewhat larger performance space, but its leadership also knew that intimacy was part of the company’s genetic composition. A new building would bring all of the theatre’s components...
together under one roof, create a new kind of experience for audiences, and provide opportunities for growth and flexibility—without sacrificing the audience’s relationship to the action onstage.

“A lot of the design process was about maintaining this intimacy, and exploring what the hallmarks of intimacy were—for instance, the acoustics of the space, the size and shape of the stage.” —Halberstam

“We wanted a flexible seating plan in the smaller of the two theatres,” says Michael Halberstam, Writers Theatre’s artistic director. “A lot of the design process was about maintaining this intimacy and exploring what the hallmarks of intimacy were—for instance, the acoustics of the space, the size and shape of the stage.”

What defines intimacy in a three-quarter thrust configuration? “Providing enough aisles so blocking can feel organic, so you aren’t quite so tied to the diagonals,” says Halberstam. “Making sure the back row isn’t too far back from the stage that you feel distanced from the playing space. Keeping the audience’s feet in the front row on the stage, so they are still very much a part of the playing space. And the opportunity to work on a grander scale, while still achieving the fine balance between the intimacy and the epic.”

Using Halberstam’s vision as a starting point, Writers Theatre began planning with theatre consultancy Auerbach Pollock Friedlander (APF), who developed program area requirements and several concepts of what the new theatre spaces might look like. Writers Theatre used this detailed information to invite a field of two dozen architectural firms to submit proposals, winning down to six finalists and meeting with them face to face. The leadership finally selected architect Jeanne Gang, MacArthur Fellow and founding principal of Studio Gang Architects in Chicago, and the 2016 recipient of Architectural Review’s Woman Architect of the Year Award.

Jeanne’s proposal said she was going to design us the most intimate theatre in the county,” says Halberstam. “From about five minutes into the meeting, we started the planning process.”

A community destination

Placing a $28-million, 35,000-sq.-ft. theatre building in the midst of the small community of Glencoe would require a level of design skill and imagination beyond the ordinary. This was not a place for a glass-and-stone monolith or a brick edifice, notes Gang in an interview with WTTW television in Chicago.

“We priced the theatre to be similar in scale to buildings around it, so we broke it down into parts, so it doesn’t feel like one big massive building, but also made it very transparent and welcoming,” she says. “We made it pedestrian-friendly, to draw people off of the street.”

The units of the building open onto a central lobby that also functions as a multi-use gathering space.

The intimate and the epic

Before Gang and her team imagined the building and its
gallery walk provides the unifying visual feature and the building’s most prominent element: Ceiling-to-floor windows overlook the adjacent Women’s Library Club Park, bringing in expansive views of the natural world outside while giving passers-by a look at the activity within.

“It faces the community, it opens to the community, and it provides a place for the community to gather,” says Gang in a video on the Studio Gang website.

One of the most striking aspects of the new theatre is the use of wood in its construction, particularly in the gallery walk. “Wood is a renewable material, and it’s very low impact on the environment,” says Gang. “We used state-of-the-art technology to create glulam trusses with steel that span the space. And the trusses, which are Vierendeel trusses, then support this wood lattice beyond, which is carrying the walkway around the atrium. I call it a canopy walk, because it’s getting you up into the canopy of the trees in the surrounding park.”
ARCHITECTURE

Support spaces, however, they focused on the performance spaces and their requirements. "She understood the need to create a sense of expectation before entering the theatre—a sense of arrival, anticipation, the sense that some creative act was about to manifest itself," says Halbertstan.

APF having provided the initial design for seating and sightlines, worked closely with Studio Gang on the development of the theatre spaces. The theatre consultancy was also charged with determining the best ways to reach a new level of functionality in the performance spaces, and also with designing the theatrical systems to suit the specific needs of Writers Theatre's casts and crew.

"Development projects for resident regional companies like Writers are highly personal and demand an understanding and incorporation of each company's artistic, operational, and philosophical DNA," says Steven Friedlander, AIA, principal with Auerbach. "We approach these projects in this way so that the final product is a completely practical facility with excellent performance spaces that are the reflection of the company's personality, rather than our own. This process allows the architect the freedom to create something truly unique with no compromise to function."

APF's approach required a clear understanding of the level of technology a theatre like Writers requires, and whether all the balls and whistles of high-tech theatres make sense in spaces like these. "Early on, we explored systems like a gantry focusing system, accommodation motorized rigging, and a fully trap Stage, but we came back to standard theatrical equipment," says Friedlander. "After intense discussions with the production staff and designers, this is what was right for Writers and for the building."

Planning two performance spaces required input from every aspect of the theatre staff, from artistic direction to production. "We had a crew of artists, actors, designers, and directors working on these spaces from day one," says Halbertstan.

Writers Theatre's production manager Friedlander and the crew secured space at a local gym and built a rope survey version of the architect's plan for the 250-seat Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols Theatre, to approximate what it would look like when it was completed. Once they saw it and walked through it, Halbertstan notes, they could find the potential pitfalls. "We had to change the aisles, the thrust was too deep, we had to open up the edges for the sake of sightlines," he says. "It was not an inexpensive decision, but we were all very glad that we did it."

The need to alter dimensions and sightlines took nothing away from the quality of the design, however. "One of the advantages of having an architect of Jeanne's caliber is that she created a room that doesn't feel significantly different from the one that we had," Halbertstan notes. "It feels effortlessly like the same space, but a thousand times better. There are only three more rows, the sightlines are much friendlier, and we have more room to breathe. There is room in the wings, it's just a night and day transformation—and yet remarkably the same."

Eighteen (Weiss manual counterweight) light machines, each with 1,800-pound capacity, are installed in the upstage area and layered cattalizes around the thrust. KM Fabrics provided the drapes, legs, and other soft goods.

Lighting capabilities include three hundred seventy-two..."}

The 250-seat Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols Theatre has a three-quarter thrust configuration that provides enough aisles for blocking can feel organic, while the back row isn't so far back from the stage that you feel distanced from the playing space," says Halbertstan.

"The 250-seat main theatre is a sheep-sheared boat that keeps even audience members in the upper rows close," wrote Tony Ador of the Chicago Reader.
To see the stage get transformed into an environment and have the actors inches from you—that was the experience. —Friedland

The audio system includes a fixed center array of 488 acoustechic 140 speakers, with a wide variety of oval surround effects and subwoofer loudspeakers. “Discrete audio and surround sound effects can be fed from the QLab playback software and other sources to the Soundcraft Vi1 mixing console,” says Friedlander. “Analog audio lines can also be patched to the console using Soundcraft’s digital Stagebox.” A BSS London processor system handles audio signal processing, and a full complement of Shure microphones completes the system.

“The new space comes with more planning,” says Amanda Holding, sound engineer for Writers’ Theatre, on her way to a training session for the new system when ISA catches up with her. “We can coordinate when we’re going to be here with each other. We’ve gone from having either familiar channels to 20 ft being digital as well. Everything’s networked. Everything’s going over Etherrent. It’s a whole new way of looking at how we do things. It’s a lot more flexible. We’re still learning how to do it.”

For convenience and flexibility, an ETC Unison Paradigm system controller on the stage lighting network runs the architectural lighting within the theatre. “The house and work lights are LED sourced, so the network is a bit more complicated than it might have been,” says Friedlander. (Lightwright Architectural designed architectural lighting and controls for the entire complex.)

The intercom system is based on a traditional four-channel Clear Com party line. Fed into BSS processors to allow for back-of-house paging and show program audio-override capabilities. A production video system distributes an HD video signal from a fixed MultiCAM stage camera view, to provide video monitoring in production and control areas.

Finally, the theatres and backstage areas have a number of computers with access to all buildings’ control systems as well as a network-based set of control panels. The installation needed to be coordinated closely with other construction trades in order to ensure proper loop routing and spacing, and to prevent any potential damage to the loop were fire alarm construction.

“The changes have been monumental for the technical staff,” but Friedland noted that the heart of Writers’ Theatre has remained. “One of the most important things we were worried about was losing the intimacy,” he says. “Working in the bookstore, which was 500 sq. ft., was pretty small to fit in an audience and a stage. To see the stage get transformed into an environment and have the actors inches from you—that was the experience. Actors don’t have to worry about projecting so much. We were very concerned about knowing that factor. So we worked really hard to figure out what intimacy translates to.”

“The new performance space is a 20 sq. ft. It’s huge compared to where we were,” Friedland observes. “Intimacy doesn’t translate into distance. The sound quality, acoustics—we worked hard at trying to get that right. So when we moved in, it felt like we had always been there and were working in it for years already.” Threshold Acoustics served as the consultant to achieve this sound fidelity. “Sometimes the acoustics are almost too good,” Friedland says. “We can hear the directors and designers giving notes to one another in rehearsal.”

Equipping a flexible black box

In the 99-seat Gillian Theatre, AFP and the Writers staff knew that simplicity had the secret to flexibility.

“The design of this black box began with a pipe grid above and portable chairs and platforms from Wenger Corp. on the deck. The lighting system includes a single rack of ETC dimmers and relays with integrated house, work and running lighting system, giving the board operator the ability to control house lights as part of a lighting designer’s concept.

Ceiling-to-floor windows overlook the adjacent Woman’s Library Club Park, bringing in expansive views of the natural world outside.”

AFP and theatre staff agreed on portable audio and video systems that could be located as required by specific productions, and moved into the fixed system for mixing and control. “Writers re-composed some of their previous systems to allow supplementing the system, if a specific production calls for additional technology.

Perhaps the most technically challenging part of the project was the integration of the Lumin Technologies induction loop assistive listening system,” says Friedlander. “This system transmits signal via a continuous wire loop that is installed underneath theatre floor. The installation needed to be coordinated closely with other systems. The loop was utilized to carry audio for the hearing impaired to the listener. The loop was configured to allow the audio to be transmitted to the listener in the audience. The audio was then transmitted to the listener’s device, allowing them to hear the audio clearly. The loop was configured to allow the audio to be transmitted to the listener’s device, allowing them to hear the audio clearly. The loop was configured to allow the audio to be transmitted to the listener’s device, allowing them to hear the audio clearly. The loop was configured to allow the audio to be transmitted to the listener’s device, allowing them to hear the audio clearly.