

As good as new

A challenging three-year renovation project at the Santa Barbara City College drama-music building has resulted in a modern facility capable of staging 21st century performances



All photographs by Chris Coealho

Wheelchair access has been improved inside and outside the theatre buildings



The Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) drama-music complex is home to excellent theatre and music departments, as well ‘The Theatre Group at SBCC’ – a professional, community and student collaboration that produces a variety of theatre and musical performances. However, built in 1977, the aging facility, comprising a 400-seat Garvin Theatre and a 100-seat Jurkowitz Theatre, presented numerous challenges for modern performances – physically, technically and acoustically – and was in desperate need of a makeover.

In 2009, a renovation team, led by John Sergio Fisher & Associates, embarked upon a major upgrade that would restore the complex to a ‘like new’ condition and yield numerous

improvements for the performers, the students and the audience. A participatory process involving all users was employed to determine the exact programme for the modernisation.

The renovation required much ingenuity due to limitations of physical space and theatre systems. The Garvin Theatre did not have a proscenium wall or a sufficient fly loft with a gridiron and the hall’s reverberation time of 1.3 seconds was not at all suitable for the music programme. The Jurkowitz studio theatre’s lighting positions, accessed by moving catwalks, were in poor condition and dangerous to use. Accessibility in both venues was completely inadequate.

Technical and physical overhaul

Firstly, the team raised the fly loft in the Garvin Theatre and added gridiron-facilitated motorised rigging for 31 line sets and six double purchase counter-weight sets.

To enhance the reverberation time of the halls, convex-shaped wall panels and box boom lofts were created. The installation of stage level panels on tracks enables reduction or expansion of the volume. Much of the ceiling was gutted (except for the existing catwalks), increasing the acoustic volume to achieve a reverberation time of 1.7 seconds, which is suitable for music. Existing adjustable acoustic draperies and pockets were restored and increased in order to enable reduction of the reverberation time to one second for plays and sound-reinforced musicals.

For orchestra performances, new shell towers and ceilings were installed, which have resulted in acoustics deemed as “amazing” by the head of the music department.

ARCHITECTURE

JOHN SERGIO FISHER AND ASSOCIATES



Triple decker

In August 2011, the San Diego High School Academy in Encinitas, California, opened a brand new, US\$8 million Performing Arts Center, which was six years in the making.

The contract for the design of the centre was won by JSFA in 2007, after the firm put forward a proposal that worked in harmony with the original 1930s campus designed by Lilian J. Rice, using the same materials and colour palette.

The 16,000ft² building has three performance venues: a 60-piece music rehearsal hall, a 200-seat black box theatre and an amphitheatre. It is divided into a music wing and a drama wing with a practice courtyard in between. The theatre contains a moveable telescoping seating system with upholstered seats on casters. The system enables end stage, traverse, ¾ round and theatre in-the-round seating configurations, and easily and quickly disappears into a flat floor at minimal labour expense.

The theatre also has large sliding doors, which open out to a natural grass 500-person amphitheatre and its stage. The surrounding



Exterior lighting catwalk with reflectors for the amphitheatre (top left); music rehearsal hall (top right); tension grid and movable telescoping seating in the black box theatre (above)

catwalk in the black box theatre contains adjustable acoustics draperies, which, when gathered, enable a reverberation time of 1.6 seconds for acoustic music performances, and when fully deployed, an RT of 1.0 seconds for drama and sound reinforced musicals.

Functional architecture

Concrete masonry unit construction prevents low frequency wave absorption and simultaneously provides proper sound transmission loss and high mass thermal retention. The curving catenary roofs and curving exterior lighting catwalk for the amphitheatre stage makes the building an icon for the performing arts and a gateway to the campus. The roof curves, convex to the performance venues, disburse the sound waves eliminating the need for internal reflectors.

The administration, faculty and students are said to be delighted with the simple beauty of the complex, its functionality and the acoustics. ■

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The team also created orchestra shell tower storage and additions to the dimmer room, as well as a new orchestra pit lift that allows for 30 more seats or a stage thrust.

Meanwhile, the studio theatre travelling catwalks were replaced with a tension grid that covers the entire space, enabling complete, safe flexibility of lighting positions.

To bring the theatre's technical capabilities up to scratch, state-of-the-art lighting, sound and automation systems were added to replace the aging theatre's equipment.

Access all areas

To improve accessibility within the halls, particularly for disabled patrons, the audience chambers were gutted and reconfigured to provide a cross-aisle and eleven wheelchair positions.

The existing lobby was expanded to include a concession area and a bridge from the new elevator, making the existing control rooms accessible by wheelchair. The new, accessible lobby with skylights provides a level entrance both to the Garvin Theatre, cross aisle and stage, and to the Jurkowitz Theatre. Wheelchair

accessibility requirements were exceeded and new elevators facilitate wheelchair access to the catwalks and control booths. This theatre is one of only a few in the country with such features.

In addition, the existing music practice modules were replaced and augmented with two new wheelchair-accessible practice rooms.

The building's inadequately sized restrooms were expanded – particularly the women's, which was tripled in size and now has double the number of fixtures than the men's.

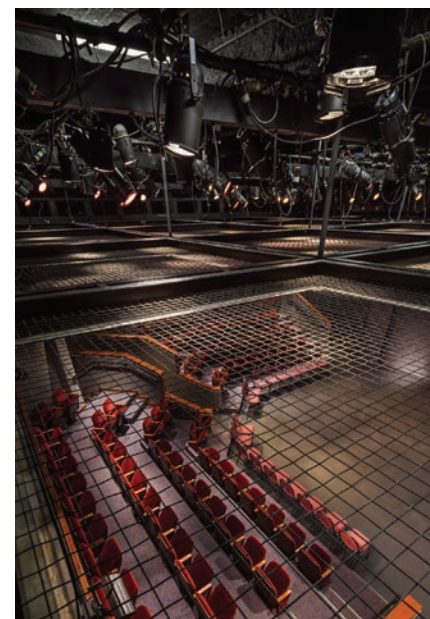
Bright future

The three-year theatre modernisation project is now complete, with virtually all of the planned outcomes achieved. The college, the theatre and the music faculty users are said to be delighted to have entered the 21st Century.

With better facilities and equipment, The Theatre Group at SBCC is now able to perform a larger variety of technically complex and demanding shows, and kicked off its new era with a series of successful performances of *Avenue Q* at the theatre in July 2012. ■

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The reconfigured, cross-aisle seating configuration features 11 wheelchair spaces (above); tension grid for lighting support (below)



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Entry court to the black box theatre lobby (top left); tension grid and movable telescoping seating in the black box theatre (top centre); music rehearsal hall (top right); exterior lighting catwalk with reflectors for the amphitheatre (above)

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