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From Auditorium to Theater

DESIGN CRITERIA FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SPACES

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RATHER THAN LIMITING programs to conform to the traditional auditorium, today's secondary schools are designing performance spaces that can support ever more sophisticated theatrical and music programs that enable young performers to learn within a professional-quality setting. While there are many secondary institutions whose emphasis on the arts warrants the creation of separate venues specific to drama, music or dance, most schools rely on one performance space to facilitate a wide range of programs, including film, musical theater, intimate recitals and full orchestral concerts.

Architects, theater designers, acousticians and lighting designers must address the increasing demands and complexity

of these facilities to achieve the desired educational and performance outcomes.

Planning

The first step in creating a flexible performance space is to establish an intimate understanding of current and desired

AUDITORIUMS & PERFORMING ARTS SPACES

school and community programs and the needs of the young performers. Addressing both quantitative and qualitative issues and establishing a list of base-line and aspirational program needs, this process will identify the typical audience sizes, the variety of programming, how frequently and quickly the facility must transform and who will manage the transformation between uses.

It is also important to realistically assess the use of the facility by groups outside

the school. Community use will require different approaches to access, storage and security, and use by professional performance companies will raise additional issues about support for loading and additional equipment.

Shaping

With a well-developed program, the design team can begin to work with the school to shape a venue that meets the programming and audience capacity requirements. The team will address a number of interrelated aspects of the design, including access, audience sightlines, scalability and, most importantly, development and nurturing of the young performers.

A nurturing environment breaks the seating down into smaller, less intimidating groups and enables the performer to

visually and acoustically connect with the audience. The more the venue can be shaped to reduce the overall depth of the space and to wrap the audience around the performers, the more that venue can create a dynamic energy between the audience and the performer. As the energy between player and audience grows, the student performer can gain confidence, enhancing the performance.

In understanding the benefits of creating a more intimate relation between audience and stage, designers are incorporating balconies, allowing the audience to move closer to the stage. Additionally, designers are dividing the main floor level of the audience seating with cross aisles and side parterres. While primarily intended to improve access, these attributes also allow direct access from the stage to the audience chamber, breaking down the scale of the audience to improve intimacy and provide interesting new performance points within the hall.

Finally, by incorporating the design elements that apportion the audience into component parts rather than a single, large sea of seats, the hall can be scaled to accommodate even the smallest recital or performance. With the ability to compartmentalize the house into smaller pieces, the audience can be seated so that it best supports the performer. Through the use of house lighting controls and draperies, unoccupied seats can virtually disappear, transforming what would have been a seemingly empty and cavernous hall into an intimate venue.

Equipping

Equipping decisions are technical in nature and are directly related to the quality, flexibility and versatility desired for the facility. Some of the many issues regarding equipping include:

- **PIT:** Is there a need for a permanent orchestra pit or can the first few rows of seats be removed to create a temporary theatrical orchestra position? If a pit is required, can the frequency of use or need for flexibility in stage configuration



Showtime. Most schools rely on one flexible performance space to facilitate a wide range of performance and presentation programs, including film, musical theater, intimate recitals and full orchestral concerts. By incorporating the design elements that apportion the audience into component parts rather than a single large sea of seats, the hall can be scaled to accommodate even the smallest recital or performance.

(standard proscenium vs. thrust) justify a pit lift?

- **ACOUSTICS:** If the venue will support both amplified and unamplified word and music, the room acoustics must be designed appropriately. Retractable stage house reflectors, forestage reflectors, balcony profiles and wall finishes will help optimize the room for each performance type. Should the program support the need, an adjustable acoustics system can specifically tune the room as necessary for each performance type.
- **LIGHTING:** While exact lighting instruments can be specified late in the project, the design team and the school must collaborate early on regarding the type and scope of the house and theatrical lighting systems. Even more than a professional or post-secondary theater, the secondary school theater must balance the need for professional-looking lighting with the safety of the student production team. If, for example, students will not be allowed to light a show from catwalks, the venue must be designed to compensate.

The lighting control position/booth (often coupled with the sound control booth) must be located to allow the operators the best possible views of the stage and the house, as well as a direct and easy path of travel to the stage and to the back of house area.

- **NATURAL LIGHT:** While a venue designed strictly for performance typically excludes natural light, the majority of these venues also act as assembly or lecture hall, so natural daylight is desirable. Products and control systems can enable the transformation of a light-filled assembly hall into a state-of-the-art performing arts venue, but their incorporation must be planned and budgeted for early.

- **STAGE:** Many options exist with regard to stage features, including:

Stage form: proscenium, thrust or both;

Stage construction: material, spring and trap requirements; and

Stage house: height to accommodate desired scenery rigging requirements (counterweighted or motorized) draperies and drops.

Schools must also develop a realistic operational plan that deals with ongoing training, safety, staffing and equipment maintenance and replacement.

Today's schools are increasingly seeing benefits of a robust program in the performing arts to their students and their community. Great facilities couple an ability to nurture the skills and talents of students in an intimate and encouraging environment with the technical attributes necessary to support sophisticated programming. Providing for such a program requires careful collaboration, planning and attention to detail. The pay-off for the effort lies in the lifelong, positive impact these programs have on students. [SPM](#)

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