



## Playing The Cape, Inside And Out

WHAT Builds A Theatre Beyond A Theatre In Cape Cod

By Davi Napoleon

### Problem:

When the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre (WHAT) opened in Cape Cod in 1985, the house "looked like an old oyster shack on the beach and had only 55 folding chairs." Dramaturg Dan Lombardo says those limitations contributed to the magic they made, but the problems were many. Actors couldn't enter from stage-left because there was no wing on the left. "If they were in the wings on stage-right and had to make an entrance on stage-left, the only way to do it during some productions was by leaving the building," he says. "The company always had umbrellas on hand."

Maybe because they had little room for special effects—a steel beam intersects the stage, just over the actors' heads—directors invited spectators to look outside at some key moments where parts of scenes occurred. The theatre developed a reputation for intimacy and adventure, and when it came to building an additional theatre, everyone agreed the goal was to maintain closeness and flexibility.

John Freeman of Platt Anderson Freeman Architects says artistic director Jeff Zinn wanted to be able to start a play in front of the building or in the lobby and then segue into the house. "We began calling this concept 'theatre-all-around' because the actors could play from any side of the house. The action of the play could move out around the audience or even move its location!" Balconies with removable seats and with stairs leading directly to the stage were a must.

Easier said than done: Site restrictions limited the footprint, height, and depth of the new building. Because zoning restrictions on the Cape kept the structure to 28' above natural mean grade, a planned fly gallery went by the boards. Sky preservation restrictions limited outdoor lighting directed up.

Fire codes proved problematic, as well. All walls, including the proscenium, were rated according to how fast fire might pass through them. "Every time we penetrated the wall with a door or passageway, we had to make sure that the fire ratings were maintained three-dimensionally." This



Some performances start in the lobby of Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre (WHAT) in Cape Cod.

was particularly tricky in a theatre that would have two sets of balconies, one of these in the lobby when the two sets overlapped.

### Solution:

"Since we couldn't [create flexibility] by making the building bigger, taller, or deeper, we designed the theatre to have as much dual use as we could," Freeman says. Placing passage doors at each end of the dressing room corridor, which parallels the back of the stage, makes the full depth of the stage available to performers; they use the corridor for crossovers. "We also placed passage doors on both the first- and second-floor level around the stage. This way, the second-floor dressing

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room corridor could be used for a second-floor crossover, as well."

Flexibility triumphed if actors could play from all sides of the house. "This really means that they need to get from the stage to anywhere around the perimeter of the house without going through the house," says Freeman, who designed doors and passageways around the auditorium, along with balconies on both sides of the house that were accessible from the stage.

The *pièce de résistance* is a building entrance that resembles a proscenium



Unable to make the building larger, the designers created the new space to serve dual purposes, wherever possible.

arch. When performances occur or begin outdoors, actors can play on the large "apron" in front of the faux entry arch. "It's all exposed steel so they can fly banners or a curtain," Freeman notes.

"There is an intimacy when you reveal some of the secrets behind a show," adds Freeman, who left structure and ducts exposed, painting the steel inside the house black to avoid inopportune reflections. The 210-seat house has just ten rows with no middle aisle, and actors work at eye level. Stadium seating ensures there's not a bad seat anywhere.

Although local authorities have not approved outdoor performances, the theatre hopes to show it can work without disturbing anyone, and the courtyard is set up with outdoor theatrical lighting. The two-story lobby also features a balcony, with carefully planned sight lines, light bars, and a dimmer circuit. "The structure of the lobby is set up so they can put fly rigging in," says Freeman.

The team tried to recalculate height to provide extra space above the stage itself, but for a mix of economic and practical reasons, height remained limited to 28'. Instead, a fully trapped stage compensates for the limited fly space, effectively creating a second story. Dropping cut-outs of arbors into the basement floor freed some room stage-right, compensating for the limited stage width.

To work within fire codes and accomplish the design, "We worked closely with the construction manager to make sure that every wall was built with the proper ratings and that each door had the proper fire ratings, hold-opens that were tied into the fire-alarm system, and closers that were tuned to the proper rate," says Freeman. "Since we were proposing more penetrations than usual in a theatre, we also had to work closely with our code consultant and the building department to make sure they were comfortable with our design and process."

WHAT will continue to use its oyster shack as a second stage, but the company can now also work in its new proscenium house, with bells and whistles that give it the flexibility it needs when it chooses not to present behind a fourth wall. **LD**

*If you have encountered a problem while designing or building a concert, event, exhibit, or play, please tell us about it at [davi@comcast.net](mailto:davi@comcast.net).*