

Up to date

A 1921 vaudeville house has been brought into the 21st century with a fast stage lift and automated rigging



Photos: Kevin Reeves

Above and right: Hanna Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio

Below: The theatre uses PowerLift automated hoists

When the newly renovated Hanna Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, launched its first production in October 2008, opening night theatergoers gained a new understanding of what the resident Great Lakes Theatre Festival could do in a 21st century performance space.

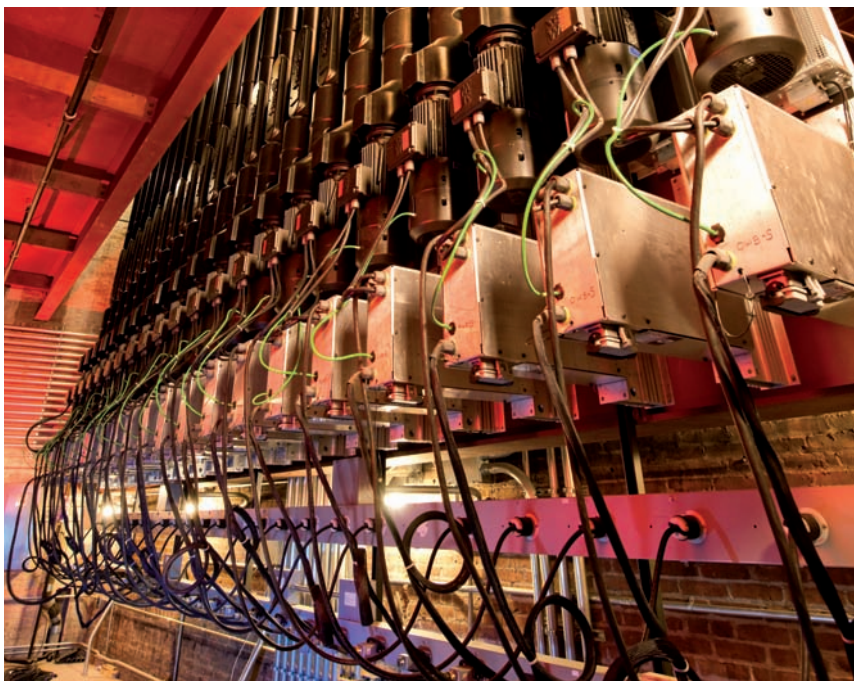
From pre-show drinks in the lobby to the production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* on the flexible, hydraulically powered thrust stage, the entire evening took place in a single room. Seating options in the house ranged from cozy couches and traditional theatre seats to high stools at an elongated bar. The stage itself, the first and only thrust stage in Cleveland's Playhouse Square Center, launched the theatre into a new era of technological capability with its speedy motors, each of which can move at

2ft per second. Behind the scenes, a structurally independent rigging system was computer controlled from a central console operated by a single crewman.

The US\$14.7 million (£8.8 million) renovation began with the combined vision of Charles Fee, producing artistic director of the Great Lakes Theatre Festival, and the design minds at Westlake Reed Laskosky (WRL), an architectural, design and engineering firm with a strong specialisation in historic theatre renovation. J. R. Clancy, a prominent designer, manufacturer and installer of rigging solutions for theatres, was chosen to supply the automated rigging and thrust stage configuration.

"This was a 1920s house, so it had 65 counterweight sets with a maximum 350 lb (159kg) capacity – and Great Lakes runs in rotating repertory, so you have two sets of drapes and two sets of scenery," says Raymond Kent, who led the Hanna Theatre design team at WRL. "No one felt that counterweights were the right thing for a contemporary theatre." Automated rigging was chosen, and J. R. Clancy supplied 48 of its patented PowerLift automated hoists, each with a load capacity of 1,250 lb (567kg). J. R. Clancy's SceneControl 500 motion control system, complete with 3D visualisation of the performance space, allows the rigging operator to select line sets, move them individually or in groups, and develop simple or elaborate cues to match the flow of the performance.

"This theatre is the first in Playhouse Square to have a completely automated line-set system," says Fee. "The 48 separate line sets are all electronically operated by computer, and we can move 12 of them simultaneously, each at a different speed or in a different direction. We changed over from *Macbeth* to *Into the Woods* in two hours – reconfigured the whole theatre with our deck crew in two hours. That is nothing, really. It used to take ten hours to do a significant changeover."



For the thrust stage, J. R. Clancy engineers worked closely with Atlantic Industrial Technologies, Turner Construction, and MG McLaren Engineering. J. R. Clancy says the lifts' 2ft per second shift capability has delighted both audiences and the theatre's director and crew. "Most theatres have 4ft x 8ft monstrosities that have to be moved with a chain hoist, and you have to bring in a whole crew to do it," says Kent. "Here the modules are easy to install and easy to remove – one guy can take out a module and away he goes."

For a stage once graced by such theatrical luminaries as Noel Coward, Henry Fonda, Helen Hayes, Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, it's only fitting that care should be taken to return it to its former glory with an ultra-modern, high-powered makeover. ■

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Hanna Theatre • Cleveland, OH • "We are the first theatre in PlayhouseSquare to have a completely automated line set system. We have 48 separate line sets which can each carry 1250 lbs., all electronically operated by computer. We can move 12 of them simultaneously, each at a different speed and direction. We can now change over from Macbeth to Into the Woods in two hours — it used to take ten!" *Charles Fee, Producing Artistic Director, Great Lakes Theater Festival*