

Rewinding Up

A community staple upgrades its rigging while making safety a top concern.

A view of Alden's new rigging features

The Robert Ames Alden Theatre, part of the McLean Community Center, was built in 1975 when the McLean, Va., community voted to create a center to support the arts. Over the years, the Alden Theatre has hosted many professional tours as well as been a home for several community theatre and music groups, including the local symphony. According to Jennifer Garrett, Alden's technical director, the success of the theatre is because of the local support and foresight in wanting to offer both strong professional and community performances in a well-maintained space. From the Virginia Opera and Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo to the bluegrass band Molasses Creek and the Flying Karamazov Brothers, the Alden Theatre seems to be booked nearly every day, be it for a rehearsal or a performance.

Since the original construction in 1975, the Alden underwent a single full renovation in 1988. In the last few years, Garrett has started to do a rolling renovation by updating a single system every year or so with the financial support of the community board and her boss, Clare Kiley. She has upgraded the lighting system, bringing in Strand C21 dimmers and adding an additional rack. The interior upholstery and carpets are next on the list, along with a re-engineering of the audio system. However, last August, Garrett was able to overhaul the rigging system after carefully evaluating all the unique conditions present in the Alden. This update was a bid project, with the spec written by Garrett and awarded in October 2005. Barbizon Capitol won the bid as general contractor and used Pook Diemont & Ohl Inc. of New York as the rigging installer.

The Alden Theatre's size led Garrett to carefully consider the new system, as well as the different user demands that would be made when the system was done.

"The initial motorized system we had from the 1988 renovation was a very basic system," she admits. "There are a number of idiosyncrasies about this space that made me have some safety concerns with the system. The way the theatre was designed in 1975, the fly tower itself is only slightly wider than the proscenium arch; so when you get sway in the battens, you can come up under something. With the old motorized system, the motors didn't know that."

There were other safety issues that troubled Garrett. "I found out that the emergency stop didn't actually kill power to the motors," she says. "It killed power to the controls, but if the problem had been in the relay, like if it didn't release, it didn't matter what you hit, and you couldn't get to the power cut off for the motors."

Garrett worked up a priority list of features she was looking for when upgrading the rigging. Ease of operation was a major point for any changes at the Alden.

"We train different people to use this equipment so they can run their shows," she explains. "We wanted the ability to teach something not too complicated, but yet wasn't limiting for us. Something the community groups would be comfortable handling safely, but wouldn't limit the space for the professional presentations booked in either."

The PowerLift from J.R. Clancy was a system that Bill Sapsis, president of Sapsis Rigging, suggested Garrett take a look at. PowerLift creates a standardized motorized system that adapts to existing theatres, since it has a wide range of mounting options to allow installations without major structural changes. It comes standard with a host of features, including Garrett's priority — load sensing. Optical electronic monitoring detects any changes in the load, such as snags or contact with objects, and stops motion immediately. This affords the security and protection her old system lacked.

By using PowerLift with Clancy's SceneControl 500, Garrett is also able to now set internal trims and have complete repeatability. She feels this also is an important safety feature. "The nice thing is you can do presets and cues, which are two different subsets, and it is computerized and consistently replicated," she says. "You can press that button and watch the

A side perspective of the theatre's stage and seating





An Alden staffer operates the Clancy's SceneControl™ 500



From the Alden Theatre stage

set so that you can react if there is a problem. We have control locations both stage left and stage right. There is only so much people can concentrate on at one time. With our old system, you also had to smell because the brakes would lock up sometimes on us."

The Alden had 13 motorized line-sets in the original system; now, after the upgrade, they went to 12 motorized sets. The farthest upstage set was turned into a roll drop for the cyc, but it is still controlled by the SceneControl 500 controller. The Alden has 12 PowerLifts, nine are variable speed, and the three electrics are fixed rate. The roll drop has a motor, but is not a PowerLift.

"People may ask, 'Why are you spending all this money?' The answer is that I don't want to be limited by the technology," maintains Garrett. "I don't want the theatre or our users to be limited. We take good care of our systems, and we expect them to be with the theatre a long time, so the money is well spent if it helps us maintain a level of professional function. I am very happy with the results of the rigging upgrade as are all our users." **SD**

For more information on the Alden Theatre, visit www.mcleancenter.org.

Kathleen Burke is a freelance writer who has 20 years experience in the theatrical industry. She also teaches and works as a production manager on special event productions.

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