

VIEWPOINT

# Don't look backstage in anger

Cramped, dark spaces with awkward access – that's what a lamentable number of theatres offer backstage. This personal account of life on tour offers a performer's perspective on how facilities could be improved

Keith Gerchak for *Auditoria*



**T**o say that life on the road is difficult would be an understatement. It means leaving behind loved ones, surrendering the creature comforts of home and interrupting the rhythm of your life to live in a perpetual state of motion. Your worldly possessions are reduced to what fits inside a suitcase, and familiar surroundings are forfeited for the interior of a tour bus, taking you from one homogeneous hotel room and oppressive backstage to another for the next six months or two years. Hi diddle dee dee, an actor's life for me.

I love performing, and I also love architecture. So, it was natural to develop dual careers as a professional actor and as a registered architect specialising in performing-arts centres, reasoning that experience gained in one field would inform the other.

If the architects who design theatres had intimate first-hand knowledge of them – not just as patrons, but as production designers, crew members, stage managers or performers – then surely we could build better facilities.

For the first half of last year, I toured the USA as an Equity actor, assistant stage manager, crew member and driver, playing the same show in over 65 different performing-arts facilities of varying configurations, seating capacities, backstage accommodations and technical capabilities.

From intimate 19th-century opera houses to modern 2,500-seat university concert halls, from adapted sanctuaries to restored 1920s movie palaces, and from converted banking halls to purpose-built roadhouses, this mind-bending cross-section provided a comparative study of

existing venues around the USA, offering to the receptive theatre architect a glimpse into what does and does not work from a performer's perspective.

### Making a connection

Definitive works have been written regarding house design and the interface of auditorium and stage, how multi-tiered solutions minimise the distance to the back wall, maximise seating capacity within a smaller volume, and bring more people closer to



the stage, with side galleries that wrap around towards the proscenium. All these measures create a scale and intimacy that heightens the human relationship and emotional connectedness between audience and actor. The performer can sense intuitively from the stage how strong this connection is, and certainly the difference between venues on the tour that fit the mould, and those that did not, was palpable. However, what

fascinated me most on the tour, regardless of the venue, were the common shortfalls in the backstage designs.

In both layout and provisions, these created inefficient and sometimes barely workable conditions, having a direct impact on the production. This experience seemed to reinforce my perception that design efforts overwhelmingly concentrate on the lobby and the auditorium. Not that this focus is unwarranted. First, these areas comprise the audience experience, a vital consideration, since the fulfilment of expectations regarding comfort and enjoyment is necessary to maintain patrons, without whose continued support theatre programming would not exist. Donors, without whom there would be no building to house the theatre programming, rightfully wish to see highly visible, physical results from their financial gifts. In addition, these areas offer the greatest opportunity to create a visionary architectural statement or iconic image that can distinguish this theatre from others within the market.

Furthermore, the patron areas are familiar territory to the architect, unlike the world that lies behind the curtain. At the risk of sounding cynical, the design of backstage can be lost in the wake of such considerations, reducing a full half of the building programme to little more than an afterthought, a series of room names with square foot assignments to be shoe-horned into a pre-described geometry, without a full appreciation for the appropriate adjacencies and accommodations that are critical to the inner workings of the theatre.

Theatre folks are creative people; they are used to making the most out of less than ideal situations

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and accepting this fate. Architects are problem-solvers by training, and I believe that better backstage solutions could be achieved if the design team had a more intimate understanding of how theatre works. It is not that I expect every theatre architect to back a semi-trailer into a loading dock, or roll equipment down a backstage corridor, or experience the organised chaos in the wings before walking out on stage. However, I suggest that by patiently educating the design team in the details of how things work backstage, walking them through the process from pre-production to post-production, some of the limitations of backstage facilities can be overcome with careful planning and low-cost solutions.

Such a tall order can hardly be answered here. But if your roadhouse, or even producing venue, is contemplating any capital improvements, perhaps a few observations from one performer's perspective can serve as a catalyst for discussions between technical, artistic and administrative staff, trustees and the architectural team.

### First impressions

The most challenging experiences on the tour often involved load-in conditions. First impressions are everything, and this is true of a venue, where the

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load-in is usually an accurate indicator of how well the back-of-house will serve the production.

In the interests of safety, protection of finishes, and freedom from the schedule of audience arrival and departure, load-in and load-out should be

physically separated from front-of-house functions. Accessible dock areas need to accommodate turning radii for production vans and semi-trailers, clearly resolving how the driver is expected to physically back into the space. A sloped grade at the dock may create a dangerous situation inside the trailer or van when staff are unloading equipment that has shifted during transport.

A survey of scheduled tours should inform the quantity and type of loading docks, such as whether or not an overhead door at grade is warranted for production vans, in addition to those set at a 4ft-trailer bed height. The most direct path should be planned to transport scenery to the stage, rolling costume racks to wardrobe or dressing rooms, and instruments and props to temporary storage provisions for visiting productions – a necessary amenity, but usually lacking. Transitions between finished floor materials, as well as between floor elevations, must accommodate a clear path for rolling equipment from the dock to its destination. Consideration



should be given to the convenience of a freight elevator, preferable to an open scissor lift, to access facilities on other floor levels.

### Dear diary

While some load-in situations had resulted from the conversion of a historic building on a restricted urban site, the solutions were sometimes less than ideal, as these journal entries demonstrate...

*26 January 2004: Despite blizzard conditions, we arrived early this morning at our venue. Load-in was through a man door, propped open with a crate that continually tripped us. We found a small freight elevator down the hall and around the corner. Four loads later, now on the third floor, we carried everything through the auditorium and piece by piece lifted it on to a raised stage.*

*The stage itself had a steep rake, which caused a problem for the set pieces that were on casters, one of which almost rolled off into the house during the first show.*

*5 February 2004: We had to carry everything*

*through the men's public restroom in order to get to the stage.*

*12 April 2004: Everything was loaded on to the open-sided platform of a three-storey exterior scissor lift in order to access stage level. I was surprised that there were no safety rails. Are there no regulations regarding this?*

*Dressing rooms and wardrobe were not on stage level, so since there was no elevator, we pulled the costumes off the racks and carried them by the armful down a flight of stairs.*

*15 April 2004: Played in one of the off-Broadway houses today. Unfortunately, the police made us move the production van during load-in because the street cleaners were scheduled at the same time, creating frenzy since everything had to be brought in through the lobby and down the aisles before the audience arrived.*

### Backstage navigation

Remember that to those on the tour, one backstage starts to look like the next. "If it's Tuesday, we must

be in Peoria." The most direct, straightforward circulation paths are best, since those who are unfamiliar with the facility need to navigate in a hurried state under the low light level conditions of a performance.

A clear separation of backstage and front-of-house operations should be maintained, with a secured connection between them for staff access at both stage left and right.

A crossover corridor must connect stage left to right and be wide enough to accommodate piano turns, as well as actors racing for a quick change or entrance on the opposite side of the stage, passing rolling costume racks or dancers stretching. Stage entrances from the crossover should have sound and light locks. Restrooms immediately off both stage left and right should be provided, as well as electric water coolers. Back to the journal...

*25 May 2004: What a surprise today when we heard him vocalising from the dressing room during that quiet moment on stage.*

*10 February 2004: Since few actually have water*

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fountains, we have taken to buying bottles of water in bulk and lugging them from venue to venue.

Locating the green room, complete with kitchenette, between the stage and stage door allows it to function as the formal and informal gathering place of the cast before, during and after a performance. It also serves the dual purpose of a greeting area for guests, who enter through stage door security. Dressing rooms should be convenient to the stage, green room, wardrobe and laundry facilities. If site restrictions preclude locating the green room and dressing rooms on stage level, then stairs must be easy to find and have direct access to both stage left and right. Even under this scenario, stage level should have, at a minimum, a star dressing room that meets the requirements of certain show riders, accommodates accessibility guidelines and provides a quick-change area in a pinch.

The problems associated with not meeting these requirements are illustrated by the journal...

*20 March 2004: Curiously, the only way in and out of the dressing room at the venue today was through the lobby. We were trapped in there until the top of the show. We had to change the blocking and wait for the audience to be fully seated before we came in from the back of the house.*

Since the stage is not always available, and the chorus dressing rooms and backstage corridors are crowded and chaotic, programming a dedicated warm-up room allows dancers to stretch and singers to vocalise before a performance. If a multipurpose room is to be used, it should still have clear floor space, mirrors and barres. Full-length mirrors with barres near sound and light locks can offer last-minute costume checks and stretching.

### Dressing for success

To avoid clutter, damage to personal property, and possible injury, particularly in crowded chorus dressing rooms, it is imperative to consider where to store performer street clothes and bulky personal belongings, such as umbrellas, coats, hats, scarfs, boots, shoes, socks, trousers, shirts, make-up kits, backpacks and so on. This is in addition to accommodating production costume racks and accessories, such as umbrellas, hats, scarfs, boots, shoes, socks and bags.

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Overhead shelves and cubbies above mirrors can easily accommodate shoes and hats, and niches can be provided to hang coats. However, it is recommended that lockable accommodations be provided to enable performers to individually secure their valuables and other personal belongings. A simple solution could be two-tier lockers located every other make-up station, secured by key, keypad, cardkey, or padlock, depending on operations capabilities.

The make-up station is the performer's workstation, at least 2ft 6in wide, with a pin-up corkboard for notes, reminders and contact numbers. Incandescent lights around the mirror should be caged; nothing compares to the smell of burning foam insulation from the padded strap of a backpack placed too near the lamps.

### That sinking feeling

Sinks with mirrors should be immediately accessible within the dressing area as well as in attached restrooms, particularly for chorus. A ratio of one sink per two performers, and one toilet and shower per four performers, is a good standard. Sinks should have enough surface area or the mirror should have a shelf to accommodate make-up, cold cream, shaving cream or other items, with a safe electrical outlet conveniently located. A full-length mirror should be near the door, as well as an intercom monitor to allow the stage manager to communicate from the booth.

The green room and dressing rooms should have windows to allow natural light. Privacy can be accommodated in a number of ways: translucent glass, locating the windows high off the floor, or appropriate window treatments. Theatre folks are not creatures of the night who crawl out of their crypts, shrinking at the first signs of daylight. The back-of-house does not have to be, and should not be, a windowless brick box; if patrons are provided with windows in the lobby, then the people who are backstage for many more hours are entitled to the same.

Of course, stage conditions are different. Light and sound locks should be provided at the rear of the house. Even in historic theatres, successful examples exist of constructing a new partition, perhaps partial height, which is open at the sides but that blocks direct light from the lobby doors. Locating exits to the lobby immediately adjacent to the proscenium can likewise distract the audience when patrons exit mid-performance. Any blinding shafts of light that cut through the darkness, whether facing the actor or the audience, can destroy the moment on stage.

On a final note from the journal, an interesting observation was made from the vantage point of the stage regarding visible reflective surfaces...

*11 February 2004: Today was a lesson in overcoming self-consciousness. Everywhere I turned there was a reflection of me performing on stage: in the polished kick plates at the rear doors of the auditorium, in the control-booth windows, in the glass panel of the fire extinguisher cabinet in the wings. Even the polished seat number plates seemed like a thousand points of light.*

### All people considered

Architects design other work environments with clear circulation patterns, natural light, appropriate task lighting, proper work surfaces, lockable cabinets, pin-up space, kitchen facilities, adequate and convenient toilet facilities, water coolers, sufficient power outlets and the like. Backstage is peopled with performers, musicians, crew hands and technical and production staff who deserve the same work environment considerations.

In the end, consider this a challenge to pursue a nobler approach to back-of-house design. It is an appeal for simple, logical layouts that ease rather than hinder navigation around unfamiliar surroundings, which facilitate the efficiency of a visiting production, and that provide a comfortable work environment. ■

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