



Westport Renaissance

Recently, Joanne Woodward, outgoing artistic director of Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut, and her colleagues, Associate Artistic Director Anne Keefe and Executive Director Alison Harris, have successfully led the historic summer theater through a magical metamorphosis. The much-heralded expansion and renovation of the Playhouse that was finally unveiled to the public in June is a testament to their leadership abilities and the skill of their design and construction teams, accommodating modern audience expectations and production needs without losing the character of the fragile early 19th-century barn that houses it.

The contribution of the Westport Country Playhouse to 20th century theater is demonstrated by show posters from many of its 700 productions, which include world premieres by playwrights George Bernard Shaw and Noël Coward, and performances by an enormous list of stage and screen luminar-

ies from Ethel Barrymore to Liza Minnelli. Husband and wife producers Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall, co-founders of Broadway's legendary Theatre Guild, established the Playhouse in 1931. Recognizing the benefit of a tryout house prior to transferring productions to Broadway, they purchased a red barn in Westport, a major artist colony one hour by train from New York City. Built in the 1830s, the barn had served various purposes, from cider mill to tannery. Converting it into a summer theater, the Langners had the stage built to the specifications of the major Broadway houses to facilitate the transfer of productions.

The Langners operated the theater until 1959, when James McKenzie began his successful 41-year tenure as executive producer. By that time, the Playhouse was transitioning from a Broadway tryout house to a stop on the summer stock circuit. During the next four decades, both established and rising stars performed on a stage housed within a

A storied summer theater gets a long-overdue, multimillion-dollar makeover.

beloved but progressively crumbling structure.

At the dawn of the new millennium, with McKenzie planning to retire, the Playhouse was ideally positioned to reinvent itself. In 1999, the New York City-based theater-consulting firm Fisher Dachs Associates was hired to develop a building program based on its needs. Specializing in historic preservation and additions to historic structures, architectural firm Farewell Mills Gatsch, Architects, LLC, of Princeton, New Jersey, was selected to study the feasibility of renovating the Playhouse.

With the development of a master plan underway, and McKenzie's imminent retirement, the theater's board sought new artistic leadership with a high profile. They approached local resident and multiple award-winning actress/director Joanne Woodward, who agreed to serve, with Keefe and Harris hired soon after. Their initial season provided the trio an opportunity to evaluate the proposed master plan.

Problems with the existing house and stage had been obvious. The flat floor of the orchestra level resulted in poor sight lines from hard wooden pew seats, further obstructed by columns that supported the balcony. The old wood grid, hemp rigging lines and sandbags were outmoded and the lack of wing space and fly galleries hampered staging. For musicals, the orchestra played either onstage or on the house floor, overpowering singers and blocking sight lines.

Increasingly apparent was that front-of-house and back-of-house were woefully inadequate. The 10' x 10' lobby could hardly handle intermission for a capacity crowd of 700, especially when inclement weather prevented patrons from venturing outside to access the concessions and restrooms. At

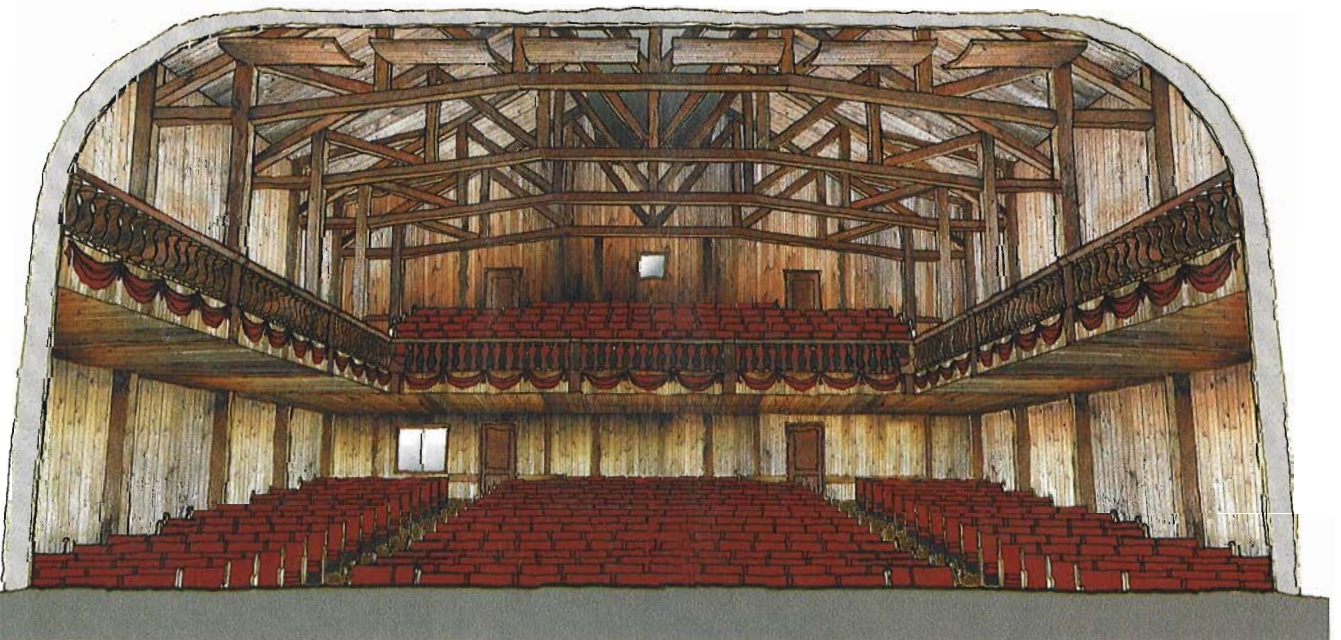
back-of-house, dressing rooms were crammed under the stage and sets were built in a separate barn, although its size, inadequate ventilation and uneven floor forced scenery painting to take place outside.

More disconcerting was the rapidly deteriorating physical condition. Seven decades of use as a theater had taken its toll. Wild animals in the off-season occupied the former barn, which was unheated and hardly weather-tight. Blue tarp covered two-thirds of the leaky roof. A technician's foot fell through rotted wood floor framing. According to Keefe, the rumbling, antiquated ice-cooled air conditioning system "had two settings: arctic or off."

The rickety conditions of the Playhouse even gave Woodward's husband, actor Paul Newman, pause when he appeared in the Broadway-bound production of *Our Town*. After seeing sunlight pouring through the cracks between wallboards during a matinee performance, Newman expressed concern to his wife, who was well aware that the building was not weather-tight. The staff had been carrying buckets to collect leaking storm water throughout the production run. "The building was being held together with spit, glue and layers of paint," recalls Keefe.

Despite the grave need for upgrades and expansion, the administrators stressed that the character of the Playhouse had to be maintained. The project was to be thought of as a renovation, not a demolition. "Joanne said that the thrust of this project was to make the theater fully comfortable for the audience and the best possible environment for the artist—but don't change a thing," says Keefe.

According to Principal Architect Michael Schnoering, the



biggest challenge working hand-in-hand with Turner Construction was salvaging the fragile existing walls, "combining 19th-century construction with 21st-century technology." The entire wood structure was shored in sections as the original loose rock foundation was removed and replaced with concrete. Two-thirds of the existing barn walls were retained and encapsulated within new construction. With the barn walls left exposed on the interior, insulation and structural wood framing were

added to the outside face, clad in wood siding to match the original. New wood paneling on the house interior was detailed and stained to match the patina of the 170-year-old original. Where solid timber framing had to be removed, every effort was made to salvage and reuse it, such as the original rigging beams for exposed roof structure in the VIP lounge.

Keefe notes that new elevators front- and back-of-house mean, "For the first time in 170 years, this barn is entirely

barrier-free." New multilevel lobbies house indoor concessions, restrooms, ticketing, an art gallery and a two-story rotating display gallery for the extensive collection of historic show posters. New dressing rooms, green room and costume shop have been added backstage. A two-story scene shop offstage basks in natural light, supplemented with incandescent lighting for set painting. The barn it occupied is now an on-site rehearsal hall, with a new floor structure and its walls braced and insulated.

At the stage house, the roof was raised to create a fully working fly tower, with a new steel grid and single purchase counterweight rigging system of 36 line sets. Loading and fly galleries hang over full-height wing space stage left and stage right. A machine pit and infrastructure are in place for a future lift at the new orchestra pit; until then, demountable infill platforms extend the stage or seating when not in use.

Inside the house, individual self-rising seats by Irwin Seating, customized with continuous pew backs, recall the originals. Sight lines were improved with a new raked floor at the orchestra level, which required the raising and restructuring of both balcony and roof. The auditorium is now column-free with a cantilevered balcony structure, and clear-span heavy timber trusses recall the original barn roof framing. Tucked within the truss space are lighting catwalks and ductwork for the new HVAC system, separately dedicated for the house and stage and accommodating year-round use for the first time.

Baffled wood paneling on the rear house wall absorbs and diffuses sound, and wood reflectors serve the stage extension. Although dramatic performances will continue to be non-amplified, a full audio system expands programming possibilities. While the acoustical

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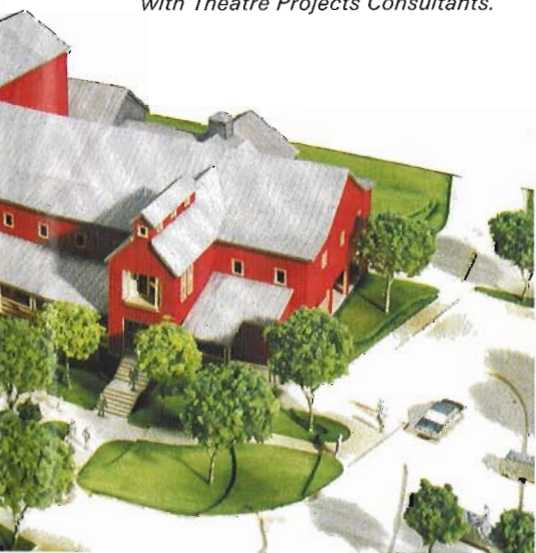
A rendering of the finished Westport Country Playhouse renovation and expansion



performance was improved by raising the balcony and roofline, Russ Cooper of Jaffe Holden Acoustics explains that the addition of acoustic musical programming could not be adequately accomplished with the available room volume. Consequently, the infrastructure is in place for the future installation of an Early Reflective Energy System. ERES uses suspended microphones to feed into a processor that adds reverberation or delay to the sound coming out of the loudspeakers, changing the reflection so that it arrives before the natural reflection. Cooper recommends ERES for oversized spaces and renovations where it is not feasible to physically increase the spatial volume. The low reverberation of the small room works for drama, which dominates programming at the Playhouse, but ERES "will also turn the auditorium into a nice chamber music hall."

After 18 months and \$17.8 million, the Westport Country Playhouse reopens, not only rescued but expanded to four times its size, and for the first time in its history it is fully accessible as well as enclosed and conditioned for diversified year-round programming. The administrators credit success to the shared vision of the board, donors, municipality and State of Connecticut. Yet, as Harris notes, "They had to have an artistic product worthy of the construction project. You can't just build it and they will come. This was a direct investment in the quality of the productions, which have been dramatically upgraded and laid the seed for annual fundraising." **SD**

Keith Gerchak holds a master's degree in architecture from Tulane University. He currently resides in New York City, where he is a professional actor and a design consultant with Theatre Projects Consultants.



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